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RE-DEFINITIONS OF SELF IN CONCENTRATION CAMPS

The paper presents some most general conclusions from an ana-
lysis of the problem of re-definition of self among prisoners of
concentration camps[1]. The camp is regarded here as a Goffmanian
institution. E. Goffman defines total institutions as these social
institutions (establishments, plants) which impose more restric-
tions on the individual than do other institutions. The limited
contact with the outside world is often symbolized by high walls,
barbed wire etc.[2] In our opinion concentration camps are a speci-
fic type of total institutions (due to planned genocide, drastic
forms of killing and violence, ideology of killing etc.). We have
therefore called them "total death institutions".

The term "redefinition of self" denotes the inclusion into the
presentation of self of camp self-conceptions created by the insti-
tution of Nazi death camps as well as the use of certain methods of
self-conception management. The situation of re-definition entails
thus a differentiation between the camp inmates' self-perception and
their pre-camp conceptions of self. In our analysis we have used
the dramaturgical approach and a notional frame from Goffmans's
early works[3].

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[1] The analysis was made in my (M. A. thesis) Redefinicje jaźni
w instytucjach totalnych. Na przykładzie hitlerowskich obozów kon-
centracyjnych, Łódź 1983 (niepublikowany maszynopis).

[2] E. G o f f m a n, Charakterystyka instytucji totalnych, [in:]
Elementy teorii socjologicznych, W. D e r c z y ń s k i, A. J a-
s i ń s k a - K a n i a, J. S z a c k i (eds.), PWN, Warszawa
1975, p. 157.

[3] E. G o f f m a n, Asylums: Essay on the Social Situation of
Mental Patients and Other Inmates, Penguin Harmondsworth, 1961;
Stigma, Prentice Hall Inc., Engelwood Cliffs, New York 1963; The
Presentation of Self in Everyday Life, Penguin Harmondsworth 1959.

The self-conception management methods are - according to Goffman - an attribute of the "performer". The "performer"   is   an aspect of self which contains dreams, preparations for role-taking and the sense of shame and fear. These are features of psychological nature. On the other hand self-conceptions which appear at the presentation of self are - in Goffmans's words - attributes of the "character". The "character" is an image of own person formed predominantly by the scenery of individual activity[4]. The "character" is thus socially generated.

Our analysis of particular interaction situations was made with regard to the above two aspects of the self of a concentration camp prisoner. The analysis enabled us to try out the applicability of Goffmans's notional frame in a desription of the moral careers of inmates in "total death institutions". This was a second purpose of our study.

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According to Goffman, "underlife" is an attribute of all institutions. It makes the individual learn to stear the middle course between the official plan of action and the institutional underlife. This dualism helps the inmates develop such self conceptions which can be presented in both spheres of life of the total institution. The conceptions of self develop on the basis of "material" in possession of the institution; this is a basis on which the individual seeks spheres of intimacy and other gratifications, since, as Goffman says, "such is his natural imperative": "The practice of reserving something of oneself from the clutch of the institution is very visible in mental hospitals and prisons but can be found in more benign and less totalistic institutions, too. I want to argue that this recalcitrance is not an incidental mechanism of defence but rather an essential constituent of the self"[5].

In our view, adoption and utilization of the institutional definition of self (self-conception) alone occurred most often in the so-called "Zugang phase" (the initial period during which the prisoner learned his camp milieu). The mortification of the self

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4 G o f f m a n, The Presentation...
5 G o f f m a n, Asylums..., p. 279.

in this period was most painful and drastic for a newcomer. The
institution could then take full possession of the inmate. The situa-
tion changed with the passage of a "Zugang" into institutional "un-
derlife" (upon internalization of secondary adjustment practices).
Needless to say, the above conclusions refer to the "average" pri-
soner who was "a small part of the juge mass of human flesh"[6].

According to Goffman the inmate continually balances   between
identification with the institution and opposition to it[7]. As an
example phenomenon Goffman quotes the so-called "Ketman" described
in "The Captive Mind" by Czesław Miłosz[8]. Ketman is a mentacious
creed, it is a preoccupation with the effects of one's actions, with
positive social evaluation and with protection of one's inside. Such
actions were a result of camp imprisonment. And yet, they were not
proofs of demoralization, as Goffman suggests. They were a simple
necessity in saving one's life and personal dignity.

Nazi concentration camps differed considerably from mental hos-
pitals, prisons, sanatoria and other institutions described by Gof-
fman. The description of inmate's moral career, of his re-defini-
tion of self and of "underlife" in camp requires and expansion and
supplementation of Goffman's notional frame:

1. The stages of inmate's moral career ought to be clearly spe-
cified. The "Inmate" stage becomes split into two substages expli-
citely differentiated in memoires of ex-prisoners:

a) the "Zugang" phase – the learning of camp milieu done usual-
ly through mortification of inmates,

b) the period of realization – the deployment of defensive te-
chniques characteristic of camp "underlife".

2. In the camp we encounter unusually drastic techniques of
mortification of inmates. In all other types of total institutions
the process of mortification is less severe. The following example
shows one of the forms of mortification and the inmate's reaction
to it: "In the corner there was an iron wheelbarrow. Here everyone
eased nature without any embarassment. This struck and humiliated

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[6] V. F r a n k l, Psycholog w obozie koncentracyjnym, Warszawa
1962, p. 36.

[7] G o f f m a n, Asylmus..., p. 288.

[8] Ibidem, p. 280.

me. In prison we were beaten on the face, abused and addressed   by
»Du« (pronoun, 2nd person sing.). Still, we managed to   preserve
the sense of embarassment at relieving nature. It was a way of de-
fending our humanity. Here the sense of shame was taken   away from
men; they became like animals"[9].

3. The "socio-technique of fear" was used on a large scale in
the camps (the welcome speeches, the singing camp anthems etc.).
Fright, terror were usual characteristic features of inmate psyche
and might contribute to adoption of institutional   definitions of
the self. Fear appears also in other total institutions but nowhere
does it play a more important role than in the life   of   the camp
inmate.

4. The initial stage of stay in camp (the "Zugang" stage) evo-
kes in prisoners a "sick curiosity" ("the void of identity").   The
prisoner, preoccupied with learning the new world, possibly lacks
orientation in the sphere of social self, knowledge.

5. The way of treating prisoners was "justified" by the social
context of the self (membership of another race) while he treatment
of mental patients is based on the social context of the mind (men-
tal disease).

6. The "fortress" technique (term by K.K.), often used in camp
by the élite of intelligentsia, comprises more than just the   tac-
tics of "withdrawal" described by Goffman. This observation is con-
firmed by methods of "fortifying" oneself (of: intellectual creati-
vity or social activities) which are absent from the   "tactics of
withdrawal". The "fortress" technique consists thus in barring one-
self from desolation, helplessness or defetims while consolidating
one's own position.

7. The unofficial (not approved by the institution) social
structure was as follows:

- "doctors",
- "dodgers",
- "marks",
- "the sick",
- "muslims".

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9 See: G. T i m o f i e j e w, Człowiek jest nagi, Wyd. Łódz-
kie, Łódź 1960, p. 12.

It seems that the above arrangement reflects the gradation of accessibility to restricted gratifications as well as the degree of redefinition of self observed in particular types of people.

The typology derives from camp language while the gradation is a part of our hypothesis. It should be noted that becoming a "muslim" is not a "withdrawal" technique but a result of starvation.

Doctors are a social group isolated by prisoners (unofficial group) as well as by the staff (official group). Only minimal redefinitions of pre-camp self-conceptions could be observed in this group. It is a group with most privileges. Goffman does not mention this type of group among inmates.

8. The tactics of taking advantage of others known as "immediate pressure" takes on a specific camp meaning which differs from that used in other kinds of total institutions. Immediate pressure often includes death penalty.

9. Due to the continual terror in camp, inmates were using certain relatively safe techniques of obtaining forbidden goods. They are exemplified by the "clandestine trade with deferred payment"[10] described and classified in my previous work. It consists in offering something to someone without his knowledge in expectation of reciprocation (also unofficial) in the future.

10. The exchange of goods in camp was extended in relation to other total institutions and covered one more item – the man himself ("white slave traffic" – term by K.K.). Camp prominents often sold their "servants" (young boys) who were used for homosexual practices.

11. The widespread homosexual relations and the resulting redefinitions of self were unintended by the total institution although they were a part of it. They can be found also in other total institutions but in the camp they gained a new dimension of the protection of "outside" values.

12. Due to the absolute limitation of private possessions in camp, nature became an important source of "substitutes". The "substitutes" were objects which replaced things of which the inmate was deprived by the staff on admission to camp. In Goffman "substitutes"

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[10] If we have to do with giving something to someone without his knowledge in hope of future reciprocation, also unofficial, then we shall call such contract "clandestine trade with deferred payment".

have uniquely practical functions of "other" things. We are of the
opinion that substitutes serve also as reminders of the "outside"
world - they are "signs of freedom". These signs were often found
in nature: "the prisoners turned their thoughts to life and freedom
whenever a croaking crow flew over the camp"[11].

13. E. Goffman does not take into consideration the role of
symbolic culture in underlife and in the general strategy of life
and pre-camp self-protection. The camp was a place of diverse in-
tellectual creativity (prisoners organised poetic competitions with
prizes, scientific conferences, theatrical performances etc.).

14. The "tactics of revolt" in camp had little in common with
"mutiny" described by Goffman. The revolt of prisoners in camp oc-
curred most frequently in the face of an immediate death threat
Under such circumstances it had features of extreme human despera-
tion. Goffman's "semi-mutiny" (e.g. verbal mutiny or a strike)
was out-of-place in camp where there was a great probability of
disproportionately drastic reaction of the staff.

15. In concentration camps prisoners had no possibility of res-
tricting their "personal territories" where they could remain alone
for some time. This was due to overcrowding of camps. Instead, pri-
soners created so-called "group territories" (term by Goffman).
A group territory is a free place to which a group of inmates claim
the right of ownership i.e. which they reserve exclusively for them-
selves in order to gain certain gratifications[12].

An example of such space is a historical tower in Mauthausen
which served "as a shelter for the weakest and those who went there
for emotional support"[13]. The notion of "group territory" is very
useful in the description of camp territoriality.

16. In describing "working an assignment" it seems necessary to
introduce a concept of, what we have called, the "pretended self".
By using it, a prisoner had more chances of obtaining a better job.
The pretended self consists in claiming certain credits and skills
unconfirmed in reality in order to obtain a more profitable job.

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[11] J. M a d e j, Bicie i robota na mrozie, [in:]Jesteśmy świad-
kami, Wyd. Lubelskie, Lublin 1969, p. 19.

[12] G o f f m a n, Asylums..., p. 155.

[13] W. G ę b i k, Droga do Polski, [in:], Pamiętniki nauczycieli
z obozów i więzień hitlerowskich, Czytelnik, Warszawa 1962.

A prisoner skillfully accentuates his merits   while   suppressing
faults.

17. Goffman does not take into account a possibility of second
mortification which occurs at a transfer to a new camp. During such
a transfer prisoners usually got mortified to a "Zugang" position
at their destination: "It was a shock for inmates that all previous
years of hardships did not count any more. They took from   us   not
only our miserable possessions (for general distribution) but even
our numbers! Thus we were deprived of everything,   even   of   our
»lager« seniority. For   some of us this fall to the position of
a nameless Zugang meant reaching the deep end"[14].

According to Goffman, a psychiatric patient, having internali-
zed the practices of self-conception management, will   apply   them
also after his release in his relations with other social groups[15].
This thesis remains unconfirmed in relation to the behavior of ex-
-prisoners of concentration camps. The ex-prisoner   will   usually
treat his camp practices as past ones though once indispensable in
surviving the camp and in keeping one's moral principles.

It is thus possible to say that re-definitions of self   certa-
inly occurred in concentration camps, but that they were   a   neces-
sary condition for survival. A. Glińska takes a similar stand when
analysing moral change in prisoners and their self-defence. "They
had to engage in double-dealing which required of them to preserve
a make-believe loyalty towards the staff and to pretend   atrocity
towards other prisoners. It was necessary to use deceit, quick wits,
cunning, pretended compliance and even servility towards SS-men, in
order not to arouse suspicion"[16].

The world of underlife protected the prisoner's   dignity   and
his pre-camp self-conception.

The presence of these two aspects of life in   camp   (official
- and underlife) enabled the existence of two respective   concep-
tions of the self: the official one and that functioning in inder-
life. Underlife practices defended personal autonomy. An individual

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[14] A. G a w a l e w i c z, Refleksje z poczekalni do gazu, Wyd.
Literackie, Kraków 1968.

[15] G o f f m a n, Asylums..., p. 155.

[16] A. G l i ń s k a, Moralność więźniów Oświęcimia,   "Etyka"
1967, no. 2.

stopped defending his self only when he could not function as a so-
cial being any more, usually due to a severe loss of consciousness.
This social type of a "vegetable human being" occurred in camp con-
ditions and was called "muslim". The loss of consciousness was a
result of starvation. The "muslim" constitutes a point of interfe-
rence of biology and society. On this stage, biology is usually the
ultimate determinant of human actions.

In the words of Goffman the substantive self ("character") is
not a property of the person to whom it is attributed, but dwells
rather in the pattern of social control which is exerted in connec-
tion with the person by himself and those around him[17]. This is a
consistently sociological approach. On the other hand the non-sub-
stantive self ("performer") has many attributes, among them adap-
tability. In the course of interaction a person may generate nume-
rous self-conceptions aimed at obtaining profits in situations in
which he gets involved. The category of non-substantive self is
thus a sequence of competence ascribed to the individual[18].

It seems that this non-substantial self may be of some signifi-
cance for self-perception. If there is a way of presenting various
contradictory self-conceptions in the same situations for various
audiences, then such way of action informs us of the contents of
self-conceptions, since the mode of presentation is subject also
to the actor's evaluation. We learn such contents through getting
acquainted with the type of interactional situation and the type
of audience, both of which must be known also to the actor in order
to enable him to apply a given interactional technique.

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[17] G o f f m a n, Asylums..., p. 154.

[18] In dramaturgism we usually take a position which cancells
out the substantive character of self. The individual was usually
seen as a "peg" devoid of all meaning, on which attributes ascribed
to the individual are hanged. See: M. C z y ż e w s k i,   Miejsce
analizy ramowej w socjologii Ervinga Goffmana, "Przegląd Socjolo-
giczny" 1981, t. XXXIII.

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REDEFINICJE JAŹNI W OBOZIE KONCENTRACYJNYM

    Artykuł dotyczy problemu redefinicji jaźni wśród więźniów obo-
zów koncentracyjnych. Redefinicje jaźni to przyjęcie do prezentacji
siebie autokoncepcji wytworzonych w instytucji obozu.   W artykule
poddano analizie przykłady redefinicji jaźni oraz sposobów obrony
swych autokoncepcji przez więźniów. Społeczność więźniarska broniła
swych jaźni przy pomocy szeroko rozbudowanego w obozie życia nieo-
ficjalnego.