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Alienation and Identity Maintenance in Quasi-Total Institutions

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ABSTRACT

TA great body of work exists within sociology concerning the role and character of total institutions. However, the existing research primarily concerns either seemingly benevolent versions of such institutions or more absolute realizations of total institutions. In this article I explore the alienating and identity-constructing roles of quasi-total institutions by means of qualitative research conducted at an intensive mental health facility for female juvenile offenders. First, I examine the ways in which the physical space is used as ‘critical space’ in identity construction. Second, I investigate how peers can act as cohorts in the continued maintenance of personal identity. Third, I explore the manner by which the failures of the institution can be used as a vehicle of agency for those serving time. Finally, I discuss the ways in which these institutional characteristics might be precursors to, or share institutional characteristics with, more absolute total institutions.

Introduction

Sociology has had a marked interest in the social phenomena of alienation and identity-construction. As these phenomena are deeply concerned with the interplay between individual agency and social structures, research has often focused on exploring how alienation and identity construction are manifest in specific social institutions at both the micro and macro levels. Research sites have ranged from educational organizations to penal establishments, but of these studies all share an interest in illuminating the far-reaching implications of institutions that seek to control or modify the behavior and bodies of their residents. The sociological literature makes it clear that the spectrum on which these institutions exist is broad and not easily classified. Clear distinctions between the more benevolent examples and those concerned with more complete discipline are not simply drawn. Thus, these institutions represent varying gradations of one another. Mandatory uniforms in primary schools do not have the same social connotations as prison jumpsuits, and class periods do not hold the same significance as a prison sentence. However, sociological research suggests that institutional efforts at bodily control have similar functional properties and produce comparable forms of alienation or identity construction despite their markedly different locations on the social spectrum. While these institutions may be characterized by similar functional tools or effects, they occupy different positions on the spectrum, from a more benign institutional force to something more totalistic. If we are to understand prisons and mental asylums as the archetypes for total institutions, how are we to understand the roles of juvenile detention facilities which bear some resemblance to those more fully realized institutions and simultaneously their more benevolent counterparts? In this article, I describe an institution that exists in the middle of this spectrum of bodily/behavioral control and explore the ways in which it functions to alienate and control the identities of those within its walls. In so doing, I address the need for a better understanding of such quasi-total institutions as a whole.

Literature Review: Characteristics of Total Institutions

In the field of sociology much work has been done on the structure and functions of total institutions. According to Erving Goffman (1961, 2), “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.” Total institutions “are encompassing to a degree discontinuously greater than” (1961, 4) those other social institutions found in society, with an all-pervasive character that is “symbolized by the barrier to social intercourse with the outside” (1961, 4). While he was quick to recognize the scholarship that preceded him on the subject of total institutions, Goffman laid the foundation in this area of study with his work on mental health facilities, which was eventually collected in *Asylums* (1961). In this book, Goffman explored in great detail the general similarities shared by all total institutions, to stress the importance of the consistencies between the varying iterations of these establishments. Goffman recognized the most important commonality as being the efforts of an institution to control or manipulate one’s identity through alienation within its structure, whether it is the most severe or totalitarian or the most benevolent or seemingly harmless.

Goffman’s work focused primarily on mental institutions. Several theoretical tenets of his study garnered a fair amount of subsequent research: poverty of resources, alienation and secondary adjustments. Poverty of resources refers to the function of total institutions that strips inmates of the tools by which they formerly maintained or expressed their individual notion of personal identity (Goffman 1961, 12). In total institutions, institutional powers undertake to remove or distance inmates from outside resources (e.g. family, friends, work, leisure pursuits, clothes, or even specific acts and behavior) to help assimilate them to the institutional standards of self or the labeling of persons (Goffman 1961, 11-12). This use of alienation is a crucial function of total institutions. Alienation, followed by a re-ascription of self by labeling individuals under conditions in which they lack the resources to counter such claims, leaves individuals little recourse besides assimilation or acceptance of the institutional identity.

Since a primary characteristic of total institutions is the control or disciplining of an individual's body and behavior, it is important to understand the function of secondary adjustments within these institutions. Secondary adjustments are practices "that do not directly challenge staff but allow inmates to obtain satisfaction... [by] forbidden means" providing the inmate "with important evidence that he is still his own man" (Goffman 1961, 54-55). Individual identity is under constant scrutiny and assault within these institutional structures, and the maintenance of personal conceptions of self, outside of the institutional powers that be, often becomes one of the most important aspects of inmate life. Secondary adjustments as observed by Goffman become common means by which an individual can rebel against institutional powers, and exercise personal agency in defining the self inside an institution whose primary function is to manage and redefine one's identity.

One could argue that Goffman's work on the structure and function of total institutions belongs to the same intellectual tradition as the work of Michel Foucault (1977). In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault tracked the changes in penal institutions throughout the modern age, most importantly the ways in which power realized itself through these institutions (prisons), and the social implications of these changes in modern societies. Foucault (1977, 129) defines discipline as "a way of controlling the movement and operations of the body in a constant way... a type of power that coerces the body by regulating and dividing up its movement, and the space and time in which it moves." Foucault eventually argues that modern disciplinary modes within prisons replace the punishment of the body with the punishment of the soul. This process internalizes institutional or social norms within a person, within their identification of self, effectively creating an ever more pervasive form of punishment that perpetuates something akin to subservience both inside and outside of total institutions (1977, 30).

While Foucault focused primarily on prisons as opposed to mental health facilities, the similarities between the respective properties of total institutions in Goffman's and Foucault's work are obvious. Discipline acts as the primary vehicle by which an individual's behavior is managed, and the alienating nature of total institutions can be seen as facilitating the internalization of institutional norms. Discipline in Foucault's definition is the process by which an individual is stripped of his or her resources within total institutions, and the internalization of institutional norms is the re-ascription of individual identity enacted upon inmates themselves. Indeed, in his analysis of discipline, Foucault describes the functional implications of total institutions, in which a person's actions and self are under constant surveillance, as typified by the mental asylums of Goffman's research.

A final but equally important link between Goffman's and Foucault's work lies in the similarities between Goffman's idea of the moral career and Foucault's concept of the delinquent. In "The Moral Career of the Mental Patient," Goffman explains that the inmate's "image of self" or "felt identity" (1961, 127) is (re)constructed throughout the course of being admitted, serving time, and eventually being release. This moral career is a crucial component and can be seen as a trajectory that results from incarceration in any manner of total institution. The process of "mortification" effectively strips the individual of tools to sustain a sense of self and is fully indoctrinated into the identity presented by the institution (Goffman 1961, 148). Similarly, Foucault establishes the concept of the "delinquent" (1977, 266), arguing that an inevitable consequence of power and discipline in modern prisons is the creation of an entirely new "delinquent" class (1977, 300). Delinquency is a result of the outlawing of petty crimes, and functions as a means by which those incarcerated are further stigmatized or internalize the punishment process (Foucault 1977, 300-312). Disciplinary, delinquent, or moral careers all operate under similar functional frameworks and can be observed under the umbrella of alienation and identity construction.

The concepts of identity construction, secondary adjustments, and general institutional structural features are explored in more depth by scholars such as Jill McCorkel (1998), who examines the ways in which critical spaces, the areas within a drug treatment program that are not under constant staff supervision, allow the inmates to re-establish a sense of self or identity outside of the confines of the institutional framework (1998, 232). McCorkel, expanding upon concepts introduced by Goffman, comes to the conclusion that the resistance critical space provides within total institutions is essential to individuals' attempts to "maintain their sense of self in environments committed to radical self-transformation" (1998, 250). McCorkel confirms the concepts presented by Goffman, including the use of critical space, the relationship between an individual's image of self and the institutional expectations for ascribed identity, and how the process of alienation informs these matters.

Edward Morris also revisits the works of Goffman and Foucault in his research dealing with a seemingly more benevolent, or quasi-total institution: an urban school (2005). This institution attempts to regulate behavior and appearance by disciplinary means to address what are seen as cultural deficiencies among a particular social group of students (Morris 2005, 25-27). What is relevant in Morris's research for this article is his demonstration of the engendering of stigmatized roles among youth through efforts to correct certain behaviors by means of disciplinary acts (2005, 43,45). Morris argues that the efforts of total institutions to modify an individual's behavior have an inverse effect, essentially perpetuating further alienation and resistance. Morris's (2005, 27) work extends theorization of the internalization of disciplinary practices, showing how that act of discipline might engender further alienation or a delinquent career.

These concepts of identity construction within total or quasi-total institutions are so pervasive that they can be observed in more popular works such as Susanna Kaysen's *Girl, Interrupted* (1994). Kaysen's memoir of her time in a psychiatric hospital tells of her firsthand encounters with secondary adjustments and identity construction. While less academic than literary, *Girl, Interrupted* illustrates the pervasiveness of these institutional functions in society and lends credence to the academic studies that came before it. Kaysen takes a perspective similar to Foucault's when she claims that insanity functions to maintain standards of "normal" (1994, 172), and when she states that hospitalization in a total institution functions to distance those on the outside from the ascription of those on the inside as deficient (1994, 94). When Kaysen argues for the distancing effect of institutionalization, she is providing evidence in support of Morris's argument for the inverse effect of alienation and stigmatization.

There is a plethora of research on total institutions, their functions and societal implications. However, modern scholarship on the concepts of identity construction and functional roles of total institutions seems to focus exclusively on those institutions that embody the ideal-type of totalitarian institutions. The degree to which an institution is able or chooses to control its occupants – from totally to partially – is of great importance in scholarship on the impact of total institutions. Morris identifies an institutional model that is far more "benevolent" than a prison or penitentiary, and far from bearing the stigmatizing burden of those "purer" total institutions. Michael G. Flaherty (1983) similarly studied the impact of and differences between adult and juvenile total institutions; however, his methods were primarily quantitative and would be complemented by a larger body of qualitative data to further explore the differences between such institutions. Foucault's and McCorkel's studies focus on more all-encompassing models of total institutions, and fail to consider what role intermediary institutions might play in individual identity construction and what they might mean in the overall disciplinary or delinquent career.

This study focuses on one establishment that exists as an intermediary between school or family structures and more fully-realized total institutions such as adult mental hospitals or prisons. The Academy for Florida's Girls (AFG) is classed as an "intensive" mental health facility for female juvenile offenders who have been sentenced for any manner of crime short of felony murder charges. The girls who inhabit AFG range in age from 12 to 18 and have been identified by a judge as candidates for AFG by either having a severe mental illness or a history of trauma in their lives. The program is predicated on the idea that rehabilitation should be the focus of time served by these low to moderate risk youth, and that the nature of this rehabilitative work must show sensitivity to their traumatic pasts or mental illnesses. Therefore, a girl's stay in the program is no shorter than six months and is promoted as being centered around individual and group therapy, as a means to address and correct problem behavior before the youth's eventual release.

While these might be the ends articulated by the institution, AFG, much like other total institutions, attempts to discipline the girls' bodies and minds to make them comply more closely with institutional expectations, rules, and regulations as they serve their time. The youth are fully aware of the incongruities between the rhetoric of therapy-based treatment and the actual function of the institution. The facility constitutes a remarkable case that demonstrates secondary adjustments and identity management in very interesting ways. While the program essentially functions as a juvenile detention facility, the girls are afforded more freedom than in a higher-risk facility, and less freedom than presented by a halfway house or lower-risk facility. AFG is a perfect location in which to observe the processes of identity construction and alienation and the use of critical space, in ways that are perhaps not as fully developed as in more severe total institutions, but that give evidence for the relationship between those incarcerated in a total institution and the inherent functions of the institution itself.

Methods

The data for this study of a total institution that seems to fall in the middle of the spectrum from "benign" to "totalistic" come from field notes I took between February and May in 2015 as an employee of the mental health facility, while working full time five days a week including frequent "doubles" (back-to-back shifts totaling 17 hours). This means the field notes indicate the full breadth of life within the facility. My official position was that of a Youth Care-Worker (YCW) which, for all intents and purposes, is a glorified babysitter. At the beginning of this study, I had already been working at the facility for about six months while also studying for a degree in Sociology and the research opportunity presented itself as I satisfied my work responsibilities. YCWs accompany the youth on all their daily tasks, from school to meals and recreational time. I primarily worked first shift from 6 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. However, when working doubles I stayed until at least 10:30 p.m., with the occasional overnight shift as well. The act of recording data covertly was made possible by the nature of documentation required for the work itself. Documentation is a major part of the Care-Worker's job: keeping an accountability sheet for the youth while they are in their rooms, maintaining a movement log to track youth locations throughout the facility, and documenting on point sheets the youth's general adherence to the rules and regulations of the facility throughout the day. All of this documentation is maintained on a clipboard, which has become a fixture of care-workers throughout the facility and served as a perfect foil for recording field notes in a covert manner for this work.

Field notes were supplemented by two other forms of documentation commonly used within the facility: Incident Reports and Special Treatment Team Referrals. Incident Reports are filled out for any physical altercations or verbal conflicts that could potentially result in an investigation or grievance in the future by the youth. Incident Reports act as a safeguard to protect the facility from potential outside investigations of misconduct or

abuse, as well as a means by which to provide documentation to insurance providers in instances where a staff member is injured on the job. Importantly, these Incident Reports are detailed accounts of the events that took place that are corroborated by as many staff members at the facility that witnessed said event as possible. The Incident Reports are therefore invaluable as data to supplement the field notes to examine individual occurrences of a particular phenomenon; they can also be viewed as quantitative data in that they can help demonstrate the frequency of such events.

Special Treatment Team Referrals were used as well in the overall body of data. Special Treatment Team Referrals (from here on called simply 'Referrals' as they are known more commonly in the facility) are the major form of punitive action taken against youth. In theory, every time a youth breaks a rule within the facility they are subject to a Referral, which records the infraction and either adds additional time to their sentence, or takes away certain privileges they might have. Referrals were a useful addition to field notes in that they effectively made researchers of my fellow employees and I could read their Referrals to gain their individual perspective on events or again to simply observe the frequency of particular events or occurrences. Referrals and incident reports were used exclusively as a means by which to identify and gauge the frequency of thematic phenomena within the facility. No youth is quoted unless the recording of such data was done in a timely manner so as to ensure accuracy. If the quote could not be recorded word for word, or as close to that as possible, then it was omitted altogether or simply used as an example of thematic elements, rather than being attributed to an individual.

Finally, in qualitative studies of this type the issue of rapport is of great importance. It was evident that rapport was never in question during the collecting of data for this research. Being a staff member who was recognized as far less strict and less apt to write a Referral for minor infractions, I was able to develop

strong rapport with the youth almost from day one. This is not to say that I got along well with all youth, or that they were always honest in their behavior or utterances. However, I could observe a stark contrast between how the girls behaved around me and how they acted around staff they were vocal about not trusting or liking. Often I would catch girls being crude or displaying illicit behavior right in front of me, only realizing after the fact that they were in the presence of staff. Even more frequently I was privy to conversations that were exceptionally frank and detailed about individual girls' feelings and attitudes towards staff, other youth, and the program as a whole. In my time in AFG I tried to present an approachable demeanor while maintaining the boundaries between youth and staff. I believe this conscious choice allowed for accurate and honest collection of data within the facility.

The youth and staff at AFG were not aware that I was conducting this study, which was, in effect, a covert ethnography. On the one hand, covert ethnography has been criticized on ethical grounds (Erikson 1967). On the other hand, it is well known that research subjects alter their behavior when they realize that they are being studied. This problem is referred to as "reactivity" or the Hawthorne effect (Hammersley and Atkinson 1983, 110; Macionis 2014, 45). Consequently, objections to covert ethnography have been challenged from the standpoint of naturalistic inquiry (Denzin 1968, 1971), and a long line of ethnographic studies in sociology attempt to avoid reactivity by means of covert research (Festinger, Riecken, and Schachter 1956; Goffman 1961; Rosenhan 1973; Adler 1985). In each case, the argument is that the study could not have been done, or would have produced reactive effects, if covert ethnography had not been used. Following these precedents, I elected to take a covert role in my own study. In so doing, I hoped to collect data concerning the actual behavior of my research subjects and avoid compromising my established rapport with them. Moreover, I only collected data as part of my required role as a staff member, and all data were recorded from public spaces where subjects knew that they were under staff

observation. I have protected the identities of all those involved as well as the organization and its location. Any potential risks to youth or staff that might have resulted from this research were therefore minimized.

Findings: Individual Stratagems or Tricks of the Trade

The program is a therapy-based rehabilitation program for female juvenile offenders run by a private security firm. The security firm bids for a contract with the Department of Juvenile Justice and, if successful, it is given a set amount of money to house juvenile offenders under state laws and according to the sentences given out by the state. While the firm has to adhere to state law, its program methods and curriculum are not dictated by the state and are almost exclusively governed by the firm itself. The established curriculum at AFG is a gender-specific program of positive behavior reinforcement policies accompanied by in-house therapists who provide individual and group therapy sessions throughout the week. This program is predicated on the notion that for female youth, treatment can best be realized through a gender- and trauma-sensitive, therapy-based approach to rehabilitation.

The facility is located in a semi-suburban/rural area in between two larger commercial centers. Youth demographic composition is in a constant state of flux as girls graduate and others are brought in after sentencing. As its composition is always changing, it is difficult to definitively state the demographic character of the institution. During my time at the facility, however, the population was roughly three quarters Black-American (Black-American being the preferred institutional label considering the Haitian-American population) with the remaining third a varying mix of Latin-American and Caucasian youth. It is important to note that this same proportion is reflected in the composition of staff throughout my time at the facility. The facility is comprised of six main buildings on about two acres of land surrounded by fifteen-foot fences. Every door in the facility is locked,

granting access to staff alone who have a single set of keys each. The primary building and the one where the girls spend the majority of their time is “the unit” where they eat, sleep, receive visitors, undergo group therapy sessions, and have a fair amount of recreational/down time. The unit is shaped like an open ‘V’, with a dorm on each arm of the V, which includes a long hall where four rooms face each other, two on either side, with a shared bathroom for each side. Each room has two bunkbeds, housing four girls to a room and 16 girls to a hall, so there are 32 girls in all in residence. In the center of the V is the cafeteria, with six iron tables having six attached iron seats each. The tables are bolted to the ground and are speckled with paint and scratches and dents from years of use. On one side there are giant sliding glass windows which are sealed shut, facing a patio that sits between the two opposing arms of the V. On the opposite side of the patio windows is a metal-slatted screen that can be raised and lowered on runners to allow the Kitchen Staff to serve the youth from a safe distance and to prevent youth’s access to the kitchen in case of an incident in the cafe. On each side of the cafe, separating the two units, are large plexi-glass doors with neighboring windows, so one can see from one hall to the other if there is no one around to obstruct the view.

To set the findings in context, it is useful to give a quick overview of AFG outside of the technical structure of the facility and focus on the effect of relative disrepair on the perceptions of those housed within or working amongst its halls. The unit is a run-down building that was purchased by the corporation as a former mental health facility constructed in the late 1980s. The rooms are dark as the windows have been painted out, or are of the smoky variety obscuring an individual’s view of the outside. The lighting is florescent bulbs behind plexi-glass enclosures that give off a dim yellow light, like the basement boiler room of an old building. The rooms are carpeted, and since the girls are not allowed to have cleaning supplies (which are handled instead by the Care workers) except for a simple broom, cleaning becomes a weekly task which most of the girls hate. Therefore, the rooms

have a constant taint of urine and sweat, the floors are littered with bits of trash and parts of hair weaves, and the halls are spotted with the white splotches of paint periodically applied to cover up graffiti. In fact, the whole facility is littered with weave. In the halls or on the dayroom couches you will find stringy knots of used hair strewn about. In the yard or patio you will find what the staff and youth have dubbed “tumble weaves” of hair that may have come out in fights and have rolled around in the grass and woodchips to create a ball of mess perpetually collecting more junk.

In the facility everything is locked down. The limited access to locations and everyday items is a primary vehicle by which a poverty of resources is created within the facility. If a youth needs a “personal” (sanitary pad) or more toilet paper she must ask staff to get some from a supply closet. If scissors or a pen are necessary for some task, they must be checked out from staff and checked back in, for if they go missing a facility-wide random search could be called by the acting supervisor. When youth are traveling from the unit to education rooms (portable units inside the fence but outside of the main facility), the dorms to the café, administration to the unit, or really between any locked location to another, they must be briefly searched by a female care worker for contraband that might be hidden in socks, underwear, or bra. The girls are fed prison food with seemingly little nutritional value but a surprising amount of sensitivity to potential cultural preferences. Hot sauce is used on everything. Large amounts of salt, pepper, hot sauce, and potato chips are used in combining different dishes into a hodge-podge of mash that is considered by the youth to taste better than the original concoction.

Simply put, AFG feels like an experiment someone is conducting on how little money one could spend on the actual construction of a facility and have it still be deemed legitimate. Every uniform is a hand-me-down and a mix of items of clothing from Target or Wal-Mart that conform to the “official” dress code of “blues & khakis” (blue shirts or sweaters and khaki pants). Plastic garbage cans that dot the facility have been thrown and smashed so many times that they are littered with holes and cracks that allow for all manner of grime and filth to leak from the bottom, making the floors perpetually wet or sticky in the areas they sit. The water pumps and hot water heaters constantly fail, so there will be days at a time when girls are stuck taking cold showers or, worse, cannot flush their toilets. The toilets often break and end up leaking into the girls’ rooms to leave the carpets soggy with waste, which often takes weeks to fix. And all of this is observed by the staff and youth, creating a sense of cognitive dissonance. In research done by Aviram (2014), the financial incentive and “cost-minimizing” approach to privately run prisons is more thoroughly explored including the effects such an approach might have on the greater physical, and human, conditions of these institutions. If one subscribes to the rhetorical justifications for the necessity of the program itself, one must forgive the obvious betrayals of said philosophy, in that what funds the corporation acquires for the facility’s maintenance and daily function are apparently used on something else entirely.

Rooms as Spaces for Identity Construction

In a short amount of time one can see just how important critical space is to the youth involved in the program. Specifically, their individual rooms become the areas most coveted for the expression of self. Cameras are hidden in many corners of the facility with few blind spots on the monitors in Master Control and the Facility Administrator’s office. Two places that cameras do not watch are the bathrooms joining the neighboring rooms on each side of the halls, and the rooms themselves. As a result of being watched constantly and their behavior being

scrutinized, downtime in their rooms and the freedom that provides become extremely valuable to the girls in the program. The girls are hyper-aware of people listening in on their conversations. Therefore, they will often have conversations outside of earshot of staff or other youth, effectively using these spaces to air grievances that they fear might otherwise have difficult repercussions. One particular youth demonstrated just how valuable these spaces were by making a habit of sitting at the door to her room during downtime so that she might listen to the conversations being had in other rooms. Patty had an uncanny ability to hear her name being said in the conversations of others and she often interjected, as on one such occasion:

Patty: What is you all saying about me? [she yells from her door way] What y'all say about Patty? [in an increasingly irate tone] Cuz I heard my name!

Girl in other room: Nothing! Jesus, we were talking about that bag you are making!

Patty: Then why is you whispering? Seems like some "scary bitch" shit! [calling someone scary equates to basically calling them a coward]

Girl in other room: Jesus, Patty you're fucking paranoid, ain't nobody talking shit about no one. [then in whispers] That fucking girl hears everything.

While it is true that Patty displays paranoid behavior, on this particular occasion she was correct in assuming that she, and the transgression the girls believed she had made earlier that day, were being discussed. More importantly, by sitting in her doorway day after day during down time, with the express purpose of listening to what "the girls be saying" Patty is displaying just how valuable this space can be.

If youth are feeling bold, the rooms can also be places where they might try to engage in relations with other girls that are strictly forbidden, as the program maintains that all romantic relationships are "unhealthy." Weekly the sleeping arrangements are altered and girls are moved as new relationships begin and others end. If a romantic relationship is observed by the staff on the unit then often not only will the girls be separated from each other by rooms, but more often than not one will be reassigned to the other dorm as well. Therefore these rooms are viewed as highly valuable and almost sacred spaces in which girls can express themselves and act out some of the illicit behaviors that they would not do if they were "on camera." Relationships with other girls, whether sexual or not, are among the most desirable and time-consuming aspects of their time in the program, and safe spaces for them to act out these relationships are highly coveted.

Finally, being off camera and in the sanctity of one's own room also affords the girls a degree of protection from punitive action in regard to physical altercations. It is easy for courts to tack on additional time to a girl's charges if she engages in physically violent behavior within the program. This does not stop all youth from engaging in such behavior, but it does make most youth savvy to the spaces in which they are most likely to get away with it. If a girl intends to "jump" (gang up on and beat) another girl, or rarer still attack a staff member, it will most commonly occur in a girl's room. Throughout training staff are instructed not to enter the youth's room unless accompanied by another staff member for this express reason. By simply being "off camera", a staff member is making themselves vulnerable to potential allegations from youth who might have a vendetta against a particular staff member, or the program at large. Often I observed that when things were "turnt up" (the way in which girls describe general unruliness or chaotic behavior on a unit-wide scale) there would be select youth who would quietly enter other girls' rooms to settle a former "beef" (conflict) in the anonymity provided by the frenzied surroundings and being off camera. The most vicious or

damaging of fights always happen off camera and usually in the girls' rooms where they can feasibly deny culpability for their actions should another girl or staff press charges against them.

The girls' rooms, and to a lesser degree other spaces off camera, therefore become critical spaces where girls are free to act out in ways that are not deemed permissible by the program or staff. They become spaces where relationships can be formed or solidified, fights can take place, or conversations can be had without the usual fear of being caught or outed for such behavior. Rooms become critical spaces in which the youth can establish boundaries of self and personal identities outside of those ascribed to them by the institution or program as a whole, and free from the scrutiny of all besides their intended audience.

Peers as Cohorts in Identity Maintenance

An obvious stigma exists for the girls inside of the program as a result of it being a mental health facility. With this ascription it is assumed, though not always explicitly, that the girls are sentenced to this particular facility because of some mental affliction. This is often the case, but girls are also sentenced to AFG because of traumatic histories, or sometimes something as simple as a diagnosis of ADD or ADHD. However, in spite of the facts around their mental health or conditions of their arrest or sentencing, an obvious and conscientious acknowledgment of stigma prevails. One aspect of life in the program that seems to perpetuate this stigma more than others within the girls' expressed views is the company they keep among their peers in the facility itself. The very act of incarceration is an extremely alienating experience, and for the entirety of their stay the girls are surrounded by staff, their fellow youth, and no one else. The youth are allowed visitation on Saturdays and Sundays according to their individual treatment teams; however, many youth go the entirety of their stay having received visitors only once or twice, thus severely limiting their interaction with the outside world. This can lead some to see staff and peers as the only

avenue for support or interaction, as the outside world is far removed from their experiences within the program.

The severity of crimes for which the girls are sentenced range from petty drug offences, to molestation and violent crime. Sexual offenses are the minority but it is not uncommon for a girl who was busted with a small amount of marijuana to be roomies with a girl who sexually assaulted a child, or who pistol-whipped someone in a robbery attempt. As the severity and nature of crimes run the gamut, so too do the girls' perceptions of their peers in the facility. Peers are observed as playing two primary roles for those incarcerated in the program: as a means of positive reinforcement of individual conceptions of self, or as polarizing opposites from which a girl can argue for her relative normalcy in comparison.

Girls in the facility can be very forgiving and understanding of individual failings. I often observed girls forgiving one another and resuming close friendships after horrendous displays of violence against one another sometimes moments before. An interesting sort of phenomenon exists where the mere refusal to forgive an individual's transgressions seems to indicate a more severe character flaw than the acting out of the transgression in the first place. The girls allow one another a great deal of space to construct their own identities inside the program without drawing attention to incongruities in one's story or description of self. Often girls take to the hall of the unit like a soap-box from which to declare the merits of their own character in opposition to the youth they call neighbors. It is common practice for a girl to address what she perceives as confusion regarding her own character in blatant proclamations to the unit and staff. What is of note in regards to these proclamations is that I never once witnessed someone interject to refute a girl's claims to self, despite how obviously untrue they might be. One such event happened two days before a youth named Miller was going to be released. She got it into her head that someone had messed with her toothbrush

(a common way to get back at someone in the program) and she took to the hall during down time to address the dorm:

I don't know who fucked with my toothbrush but that shit is petty. Y'all bitches are petty and I can't wait to get away from all of you. But you know what [she says pantomiming as if she was going back to her room but had just remembered something important], I have been here for almost eighteen months and I ain't never fucked with no one's toothbrush. I might've fucked a bitch up, but I don't fuck with no bitch's stuff, and that's why y'all bitches are petty and some basic [someone far from exceptional or amazing but instead totally ordinary] ass thoughts [someone not worth a second thought]!

What is interesting about this outburst is that Miller had the day before laughed about how she peed on a girl's toothbrush for eating her chips. No one interjects, perhaps from fear of repercussions, but such acceptance of contradictions was observed almost daily concerning a myriad of issues, most of which are inconsequential: a girl's promiscuity; her skills as a student or a braider of hair; her value as a friend, mother, or daughter; her ability to sing, dance, or play basketball; concerning all of which her fellow youth often possess disparaging evidence that contradicts their claims to self, but are almost always held back.

Perhaps more importantly, peers serve as an example of just how normal a girl is by comparison. The previously mentioned sex offenders are the perfect example. Girls with violent criminal charges often point to these girls and say, "Hey, I might be bad but I am nowhere near as crazy as that girl." The diversity in crimes and degrees of mental health provide girls of all demographics with someone else they can point to as a more dire case than themselves. Those with petty drug sentences can create images of self in opposition to those with breaking and entering charges. Those with B&E charges can place themselves in

opposition to those with grand theft auto charges, GTA to aggravated assault, and aggravated assault to sexual assault or molestation. Moreover, the comparison can be seen in the ways one particular youth who was charged with molesting an eight year old girl compared her idea of normalcy to another youth charged with sexual assault who also admitted to engaging in bestiality with her family's dog.

In an institution that is constantly labeling them as deviant or criminals, the girls act in ways to maintain their own felt identity that they are not as strange as the program would have them believe. The girls can also reinforce positive ascriptions of self in not reminding one another of personal transgressions or moral failings and allowing a bit of room for each other to construct individual identities that are defined not by their acts but simply by their words and expressions of felt identity. In AFG, peer relations become the most obvious and unique way in which the girls would re-establish and re-define themselves despite institutional ascriptions or efforts to label them as criminals, delinquents, or otherwise.

The Perceived Failures of Curriculum as a Vehicle for Agency

If there is a single all-pervasive sentiment held by youth (and many staff members) in the facility, it is that the proposed institutional methods are a failure and a joke. The language used to describe the program to outsiders or those being processed into the facility is that it is a therapy-based rehabilitative institution, but by the time girls leave they almost always hold the view that they were simply doing time. The punitive action taken is seen as arbitrary, and the therapy that is supposed to be the focus of the program is generally considered close to non-existent. By the time a girl leaves she is often in open defiance of the system, and has a keen understanding that she will be released eventually despite her behavior, and that sometimes the more combative you act, the faster you are processed out. A perfect example is Shawna.

She was 15 years old, AFG was the most recent of three juvenile justice programs in which she has been incarcerated, and she was close enough to her release date that she no longer ascribed to the expectations of the program at large. On a particular evening she was refusing to go to her room after “lights out” (the time when all girls are supposed to be in their assigned rooms and going to sleep), and responded to a fellow staff member after being threatened with a referral in the following way:

You know what, fuck that referral...I am gonna do what I feel and take that referral [implying that she will suffer the consequences without concern]. You know why? Because fuck your referral and fuck this place! Matter of fact let me sign that shit first before you fill it out since I am probably going to CO [controlled observation, which is a room used for youth in extreme states of combativeness or self harm]. [She then begins to sing and dance along the hall] Because referrals don't mean shit and this place is a joke! I won't stay here longer because y'all don't want me so my release date is safe! [All while donkey-kicking the doors and walls of the dorm] Shawna's blatant display of defiance and refusal to comply with the institutional standards is commonplace among girls who have spent a decent amount of time in the program. What Shawna demonstrated – normal behavior for most of the girls – is the awareness that the curriculum is not necessarily operating as it proposes to, and that once they come to this realization the youth can act out behavior that is supposedly illicit or problematic without fear of repercussions.

In addition to the perceived failures of the institutional curriculum, the therapeutic aspects of the program are also seen as failing and a point of contention with the girls in the facility. One such exchange displays this perfectly when three girls were sitting by the door to the patio as they spotted a therapist leaving the

opposite dorm with a youth in tow:

Girl 1: there goes [therapist name] with [other youth]. That's gotta be like their fifth session this week! Must be writing a fucking book. [She then turns to another youth] Isn't [therapist name] your therapist?

Girl 2: She was but then I got [a second therapist name] and then they switched me back to [original male therapist upon arrival] but I haven't seen them for weeks.

Girl 3: Shit I have been here for three months and have had two sessions!

This conversation is emblematic of the general sentiment observed in the facility: therapy is seen as something that is an afterthought at best. Girls end up treating their one-on-one therapy sessions as a game of sorts to see what will make a therapist return to them on their scheduled appointments and what will not. One youth relays a story about her interactions with her therapist:

At first I wouldn't say shit. I would sit there and stare at the ground and she would ask questions until she got pissed and then she would do her paper work, and type and shit, and I would just sit there [kind of laughing as she tells the story]. But then I'm like, “da fuck? I gotta meet with you so I can leave, so do your fucking job! Right?” And she would be like, “If you don't want to talk that's your choice.” So then I started telling her I was having suicidal thoughts and she called bullshit, and she was right but, the fuck! That's the only way you're gonna meet with me then I gotta say some shit like that! [the therapist in question is now in the cafe, within eyesight but cannot hear the conversation being had] So now she's all fucking pissed because I am all pissed and telling her she doesn't know how to do her job and she is like, “I can't help someone who doesn't want to be helped,” but this is our fucking second meeting in like

two months so fuck that!

The attitude this youth articulated is in fact the norm among the girls of AFG. Many grievances against staff or the program in general come from complaints that the therapists display favoritism or fail to keep appointments. This results in the youth understanding that the only way to get attention from the therapists is to display more dramatic, potentially threatening behavior.

By discussing the shortcomings of the methodology or proposed curriculum of the program, the girls can exercise personal agency or redefine their place within a system that they recognize as failing in its goals. The failures of the facility are used to reaffirm their own beliefs that they are victims of circumstance, and are doing time for crimes that might not be as severe as the program or judicial system would have them believe. In my time at AFG, the pervasive sentiment that the program was flawed or broken became an almost expected aspect of relations with youth and staff. AFG became a subject of ridicule as the ineffectuality of its methods became more commonly accepted as true.

Discussion: The Intermediary Role of Quasi-Total Institutions

Organizations such as AFG exist as intermediary total institutions on the spectrum of control of behavior and bodies. AFG lies in between seemingly benevolent schools and clearly harsh prisons. A gap in previous research exists in that the work done by Goffman and Foucault focused on more fully realized versions of total institutions and did not include the likes of AFG, which exist on the more lax end of the spectrum of bodily control and discipline. AFG offers an obvious opportunity to extend such theories of total institutions; however, it is the halfway point, a quasi-total institution, or a not-fully-realized version of an ideal-type. The identity construction and control that exist within AFG are not as dramatic as those found in Goffman's work, and the control and disciplining of individuals' bodies are nowhere near the scale

seen in the work of Foucault. However, total institutions like AFG occupy a very important space where this identity construction and bodily control is first introduced to individuals who, due to potential failures of rehabilitation and the generally high likelihood of recidivism, may eventually find themselves in the types of institutions that are of a more absolute variety.

As demonstrated by McCorkel (1998), Morris (2005), and Colwell (2007), as well as Goffman and Foucault, total institutions "engender resistance and alienation" (Morris 2005, 41), both of which can be easily observed in the material I gathered at AFG, although they are nonetheless slightly more nuanced and less explicit than in total institutions. The environment and nature of incarceration at AFG serve to alienate the youth held there by limiting contact with the outside world as well as information the girls receive or transmit from the facility. Girls use their rooms as critical spaces for identity maintenance and as a means for secondary adjustments. The critical spaces can be seen as an outlet by which they can reaffirm their personal identities inside an institutional apparatus that is attempting to convince them otherwise. Images of self can be further explored and solidified by reference to their fellow youth, who they portray as their polar opposites. And finally, secondary adjustments are pursued by the rejection of the program's methodology or curriculum, which is increasingly seen as obsolete, ineffectual or inconsequential.

If we subscribe to theories of the internalization of disciplinary power and the importance of identity maintenance in total institutions, then we must understand the machinations and structural features of total institutions that are not ideal types, but exist as something of an intermediary, or as an agent for future total institutional powers. If it is true that there is a delinquent career or disciplinary career, then institutions like AFG are an important phase within those careers and more scholarship should be dedicated to its study. Perhaps most importantly, if total institutions engender alienation and resistance within a delinquent or

or moral career, this phase must be clearly understood within institutions like AFG that serve in between the more absolute and the more benign social institutions. The claims that a quasi-total institution offers concerning therapy or rehabilitation help to make it a palatable (and, for that reason, increasingly common) intermediary in the juvenile justice system.

Conclusion

Quasi-total institutions have a multifarious role in the process of alienation and identity construction for those housed within their walls. The quasi-total institution (AFG) in this study exhibits many of the same functional elements as more fully realized total institutions and thus raises similar issues of identity maintenance and use of critical space. For future research it is necessary to study total institutions of similar structural nature as that of AFG. While existing research on quasi-total institutions exists (Flaherty 1983), it is primarily quantitative research that would be nicely complemented by further qualitative study. To study more cases one might delineate a clearer relationship between the ideas of identity construction and institutions that are not all-pervasive in their methods or structure, but still (at least in theory) share some of the features of fully-realized total institutions. Importantly, it would be wise to explore in more depth the effect of gender, class, age, and sexuality on secondary adjustments and identity construction. How does a gender-mixed facility of similar structure compare to those of single sex? Do juvenile detention facilities echo the findings of this research, or do they seem more closely related to institutions where the opportunities provided by mental illness ascriptions do not exist? Identity maintenance and secondary adjustments may manifest themselves in dramatically different ways depending on gender, sexuality, and other demographic characteristics, but those differences will only become

clear with subsequent research. And finally, potential connections should be explored after girls are released from institutions like AFG with transitional periods in other societal institutions outside of, or in between, other total institutions.

Clearly, the fact that AFG is a for-profit, private company dramatically affects the methods by which it is run and its institutional structure as a whole. Research such as that of Brett Burkhardt (2014) suggests that the moral legitimacy of private prisons has been a significant concern for the greater population as well. It would be interesting to explore the similarities, or differences, in facilities of similar structure that are non-profits or completely state or federally run. Perhaps the fundamental institutional characteristic would exist to lesser or greater degrees, but the profit motive may well have a drastic effect on an institution's influence or structure. I suspect that alternative methods of rehabilitation exist, as well as institutions that have the potential to combat the perpetuation of disciplinary power, internalization, and alienation, but that these possibilities have not been fully explored, as the acceptance of total institutions of this nature is something close to unconditional in contemporary US politics and American society at large.

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