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Defending the Self in a Total Institution: Staff Prompting and Patient Burlesque

PDF (Size:117KB) PP. 465-476   DOI: 10.4236/sm.2012.24060

Author(s)

Karen Bettez Halnon

ABSTRACT

This paper offers an analysis of forms of social interaction between direct care staff and patient members of a state institution for the "Mentally Retarded" (MR) and dually-diagnosed (MR with a mental disorder diagnosis) located in the northeastern United States. This work's significance is that it updates and extends Erving Goffman's (1961) classic study of the *underlife* of total institutions. It does so by delineating a sub-type of *secondary adjustment* to total institutions, termed ancillary adjustment. Ancillary adjustment is defined as *performances of patient role that undercut the institution's official prescription for patient identity toward normalizing direct staff member identity*. It is shown how ancillary adjustment arose as an unintended consequence of the institutional reforms of the 1970s, or how, under a professionally reformed and bureaucratized "New School", direct care staff members experienced themselves as disempowered and discredited as "normal" professionals and defensively and repeatedly cued hyper-stigmatized comedic spectacles through types of staff-patient interaction termed *staff prompting and patient burlesque*. This paper is based on a three-year fieldwork study entitled *Defending the Self in an Institution for the Mentally Retarded* that utilized Glaser and Strauss' (1967) and Strauss and Corbin's (1990) *grounded theory* methods for qualitative research.

KEYWORDS

Stigma; Normalization; Underlife; Total Institution; GOFFMAN; Mental Patient; Mental Retardation

Cite this paper

Halnon, K. (2012). Defending the Self in a Total Institution: Staff Prompting and Patient Burlesque. *Sociology Mind, 2,* 465-476. doi: 10.4236/sm.2012.24060.

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