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 Prentice Hall, pp. 56-60.

Navy Boot Camp: Role Assimilation in a Total Institution

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Much of our socialization represents a gradual progression toward maturity. Each agency of socialization builds on what came before and prepares us for what is to come after. Preschool prepares us for kindergarten, kindergarten for elementary school, and so on. From this perspective, we can see going away to college as preparation for establishing a separate household and living on our own. Some socialization experiences, however, depart radically from what has gone before—for example, recruitment to a religious commune or learning the ropes in prison. Any such break from the past is best accomplished by isolating the individual from contact with outsiders. Being cut off from former relationships deprives the individual of that looking glass reflection of the “former self.” Breaking down the existing self-concept makes it possible to instill a new one. Sometimes this process is referred to as resocialization.

Using his own experiences as an enlisted man in the U.S. Navy, as well as interviews and documentary material, Zurcher focuses on the discontinuity of socialization in naval boot camp. The recruit training center is seen as a “total institution.” This means that recruits are isolated from the outside world; their physical needs are met and daily activities planned by a centralized authority. In this setting, boot camp effectively challenges the civilian self-concept of the new recruit. As civilians, we value our freedom of movement and expression, our privacy and personal integrity, and our ability to shape our own physical appearance. The Navy assaults these values as a means of breaking down the assumptions and expectations of the recruit’s former life. In their place, the recruit training center tries to substitute the role of the sailor. Later, the advanced phase of boot camp is oriented toward building up the pride and identification necessary to the successful fulfillment of the sailor’s obligations.

Goffman has defined a total institution 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.”¹ According to his definition the naval recruit training center can be seen to be a total institution. All aspects of the boot’s life are conducted in the same place (the center) and under a

single central authority (the center commander, or, more broadly, the U.S. Navy). The recruit does *everything* in the company of others and the expectations for his particular recruit behavior are the same for all his fellow recruits. The day’s activities tick off “by the numbers,” everything done at the proper time in the proper place, according to an elaborate “plan of the day,” published daily and posted by order of the commanding officer. There is a single rational plan (to create sailors out of civilians) purportedly designed to fulfill the official and instrumental function of the center (to supply the fleet with manpower). The supervisors have their own quarters, mess and recreational facilities, are allowed to leave the training center, and cannot be approached by the recruit without strict adherence to the “chain of command” and to “military courtesy.” A supervisor is *anyone* who is not a recruit. The boot seldom can be certain what is in store for him from one moment to the next. He is told to fall in, to march, and finds out his destination when he gets there. The work structure is based on a twenty-four hour day of classes, drill, physical training, and watches, and the recruit is reminded that he “belongs to the Navy even when sacked out.”² Barriers separating the training center and the recruit from society at large are tangible in the form of barbed wire and armed Marine guards.

At the beginning of his first week in boot camp, the recruit is assigned to “R and O” (Receiving and Outfitting). In “R and O” the boot lives, along with approximately sixty other members of his recruit company, in a section of the training center which is literally isolated from the remainder of the center. The “R and O’s” (as they are called by the staff and by the more advanced boots) have their own mess hall, their own medical facility, their own “grinders” (marching fields), and are not allowed access to the center-at-large.

It is during this “R and O” phase that the challenge to the civilian self begins in earnest.

From the point of view of the training center, the boot has come through the gates with a well-developed personality, a civilian frame of reference, and a set of cultural values and expectancies that are not compat-

ible with the center's objective and organization. The adjustment problem for the recruit consists in reorienting his behavior from a civilian frame of reference to the military standard. Such an adjustment is no easy task, considering the demands of the training process.

In general, the pressures of the recruit training center, especially the "R and O" phase, *challenge*, after Goffman, four areas in the boot's life that have much influenced his understanding and acceptance of himself as a "civilian," and which have provided a foundation for and a reinforcement of his concept of self: (1) autonomy of action (self-determination, responsibility for his own behavior, feeling relatively free to express himself and to make choices, feeling personal integrity); (2) personal economy of motion (feeling free to move spontaneously toward, away from, or against a given experience according to his preference, able to set own activity pace, to control and vary own rate of locomotion); (3) privacy (having opportunity for physical and mental privacy, having places where he can be alone and "get away from it all"); (4) individual's picture of himself as a physical person (seeing himself in his usual choice of clothing, degree of neatness, tontorial demeanor).³ The following are some examples, taken from the writer's field notes, of challenges to these self-sustaining areas which are encountered by the "R and O":

Challenge to Autonomy of Actions

- Hours for sleeping, hours for eating, hours for the use of the "head" (toilet facilities), frequency of shaves, smoking, and other similarly previously autonomous actions are now rigidly scheduled.
- The recruit is told that he *will* write a letter home each week; thus a measure of control is established over his interaction with the original primary group.
- All clothing, all bedding, and all personal gear must be stored in exactly the prescribed manner. Any individual deviations result in punishment for the entire company of recruits. In controlling the condition and position of the boot's personal effects, authority strengthens its control over the condition and position of the boot, who has invested some element of himself in his belongings.
- "You have been issued five pairs of shorts. Put one pair on each shoulder, one pair in your teeth, and hold one pair in each hand. Now, do you have a pair of shorts on each shoulder, in your teeth, and in each hand? Good! Put them in the sea bag. Next, you have been issued six pairs of stockings. . . ."

Challenge to Personal Economy of Motion

- "When I give the command 'Attention!' you will bring your heels together sharply, toes at a 45 degree angle. Your hands will be by your sides, in a natural position, with your thumbs lined up with the seams in your trousers. You will pull your stomach in, push your chest out, keep your mouths closed. If I haul out of here for a weekend liberty while you're at attention, you had better be in that same position when I get back!"
- Everywhere the boot goes, he must march in formation. If for some administrative reason he must go somewhere alone, he will be given a "walking chit" (permit), stating his point of origin, his destination, a time limit, and who has given him permission to walk independently.

Challenge of Privacy

- "There's a folder up in the administration office. We know more about you than you do!"
- "Remove all of your clothes, sit over there on that bench, and wait until you are told to line up facing the doctor."
- "You with the dreamy look in your eyes! What are you thinking about!"

Challenge to the Individual's Picture of Himself as a Physical Person

- Within a matter of hours after arrival at boot camp, the new recruit is told to remove all of his civilian clothes, his jewelry, religious medals, etc. and place them, along with wallet, comb, key ring, and the like into the shipping box that has been given to him. He stands there nude and wraps and addresses the box containing the accouterments of his civilianity. When finished he proceeds through a line in which he is issued his naval attire.
- The haircut takes about thirty seconds. Full length mirrors are conveniently placed around the barber shop. The reflection of the shorn head, the baggy clothes, the drawn features, makes its point, you *are* a boot!
- "You boots with the lard tails will knock off at least twenty pounds, and you beanpoles will gain at least twenty, before you get off these grinders!"

Assault after assault is made on the new recruit's "presenting culture" self. It seems that many of his responses to situations which had served him well in civilian life are now inappropriate or ineffective. He seems to be unable to do anything right. Everywhere he goes, everyone he must deal with, reminds him that he is not an individual but an "R and O" boot, the lowest of the low. Even other recruits, those who are on the other side of the isolation fence, shout derisions at his clumsiness, his appearance, his confusion. The new recruit's company is marched over to the end of the isolation area facing the main drill field. There he and his company mates stand in their ill-fitting, stiff dungarees, arms still burning from shots, heads cold and itching from the haircut, tired, lonely, and lost. On the main drill field, company after company of sharp-stepping, cadence-singing seventh- and eighth-week recruits parade smartly by to the thundering drum rolls of the center band.

In the society at large the civilian compartmentalizes his roles. He can be student, son, sweetheart, part-time grocery-clerk, and he understands a set of reciprocal expectations for each of these roles. Similarly he comes to expect compartmentalized authority over him. The professor may be able to set down limits for his classroom performance, but the professor cannot tell him what, where, and when, for example, to eat.

In the naval training center, the boot has a single role (the expectations of which are painfully vague at first), and the authority over him is not compartmentalized. Any member of the staff can correct him for any offense at any time.

During the "R and O" phase of recruit training, the boot has been pushed, pulled, and badgered from five in the morning until ten at night (and is awakened from sleep to stand watches). He has been challenged in his previous expectations of autonomy of action, personal economy of motion, privacy, and his picture of himself as a physical person. He has found that the confidence he had in himself as a civilian is no longer supportive, that in the training center environment his previous pattern of behavior leaves him powerless, isolated, in conflict with the sanctioned norms, and makes most of the center's day-to-day events appear meaningless. In short, if the purposes of the center have been realized, the recruit's phenomenal experience of identity has been muddled, the comfortable feeling of knowledge of himself has been taken away, and he begins to reject his earlier conception of self and civilian expectations as being ineffective.

During the "R and O" phase, the role of sailor has been constantly presented—in the physical environment, in the example of the company commander, in

the glimpses the "R and O" gets of advanced recruits. But the emphasis (not necessarily to be construed as intentional or by design) was on role dispossession; and the major result, from the point of view of the recruit, is confusion rather than enactment of the sailor role. Hollingshead points out that in the training center, though the opportunity to attain military status is present, the meaning of military status does not grow clear for some time. When the recruit realizes that he is in a military Navy now, "the self will begin to appraise itself in relation to the new situation, and to adjust, or to figure out ways to evade the situation."⁴

It would not be correct to say that for every boot the "R and O" phase represents depersonalization and role-dispossession, and the advanced recruit stage (last six weeks) represents a clearer presentation of the center's role expectations meant to fill the gap. Rather, role dispossession and role enactment exist on a continuum, varying in time and degree for each recruit. However, examination of the structure and scheduling of the two phases of recruit training reveals the "R and O" period of the process as functional largely in decivilianizing the recruit, while the advanced period is functional largely in defining the expectations of the sailor role.

Upon the completion of "R and O," the recruits move to new quarters in the main area of the training center, shed their dungarees for blue or white uniforms (depending upon the time of year), and are issued a colorful company flag. Their company is now in official competition with the ceremony at the Saturday brigade review. The boot begins to see himself and his mates in a different light. Where before there was confusion, clumsiness, individual isolation, and general uncertainty, now there are the "men of Company 123." The *company* becomes the center of orientation. Hollingshead posits that there is a group substitute for the shattered civilian self.⁵ Brotz and Wilson observed that "the complete severance of accustomed social relations finds compensation in part in the acquiring of "buddies."⁶ To the recruit, the term "buddy" applies to every man in the company. The hours of drilling and exercising together, the constant exhortations to "move as one man," work as a unifying discipline. Marching may be joked about, points out Warren, but let another man get out of step as the company passes in review and the in-step recruit "curses under his breath."⁷

The low status held by the recruit in "R and O" makes the new uniforms, the company flag, the new quarters in the main part of the training center, and a place among the advanced recruits seem like a giant step upward. Dornbusch observed a similar phenomenon in the Coast Guard Academy where the assignment of low status to the "swab" was "useful in produc-

ing a correspondingly high evaluation of successfully completing the steps in an Academy career."⁸

The recruit finds himself united with his mates in Company 123 to "bilge the other companies" for the weekly honor prize (which is symbolized by a streamer or star affixed to the company flag. The flag is carried by the guideon bearer, who marches at the head of the company).

Air Force men are "sloppy," "airdales," "flyboys." Marines are "jarheads," "jungle-bunnies," "sea-going bell-hops," "gung-ho." Coast Guardsmen are "fresh water sailors," "lighthouse keepers."⁹ Soldiers are "dogfaces," "female marines." But we are *sailors*, the men of Company 123. Heels pounding in cadence unison, company flag snapping in the breeze, Company 123 now takes its turn marching fiercely past the "R and O" company standing in ragged lines on the other side of the chicken-wire fence.

Got no women, got no dough,
But at least we're not in R and O.
Sound off! Sound off!
Cadence count!¹⁰

Goffman states that the member of the total institution regains stability of self as he learns the institutional privilege system.¹¹ This system is presented by formal training (classroom and field) and informal instruction (examples set by staff and more advanced recruits or "bull" sessions) and makes possible a clearer understanding of the role expectations involved in the role of sailor, thus providing a framework for personal organization.

The boot now attends daily classes in naval tradition and customs, in gunnery, first aid, seamanship, naval history, military conduct, shipboard organization, etc. He finds himself proud of his knowledge and likes to demonstrate his prowess in sailor skills, such as knot tying, flag signaling, and so on.

The boot is a member of a boat crew, a fire-fighting team, a rifle squad, and a watch section, in each of which he clearly knows what is expected of him and what he can expect of his teammates. He learns naval argot and finds that he can communicate with the "real sailors" who are his instructors. Automatically now the floor is a "deck," the ceiling is "overhead," the flight of stairs a "ladder." It is not "right and left" but "starboard and port," not "front and back," but "fore and aft." He comes to be familiar with argot terms for many of the physical objects around him which previously had civilian names. Various events and sequences of behavior unique to the military are now understood by the recruit in single terms such as "taps," "AWOL," "lib-

erty," "square away," "field day," etc. Frederick Elkin has demonstrated that the recruit's acceptance of military language patterns reflects an image of solidarity and an admission of break with civilian society.

The use of so-called "taboo" language is significant of a freedom from certain restraints of the civilian culture. "The most significant feature of such expressions is that . . . they give . . . a unique universe of discourse which helps distinguish him (the member of the military), and thus they become a binding-in-group force."¹² Some authors vividly describe the obscenity of the language of the military man, and explain it in terms of expression of aggression, traumatic regression to an earlier level of impulse gratification, negativism, need to express virility in the threat of purely masculine society, etc.¹³ These certainly may be factors in the frequent use of tabooed language by the member of the military, but the importance of role expectations must not be overlooked. Elkin also points out that the obscene terms come into universal and relatively indiscriminate usage and thus lose their original sexual significance. The words merely become the language of a social group.¹⁴ There seems to be no one emotion expressed by a given obscene term. One given word can be used positively, negatively, or as neutral expression. Sometimes the obscenity will be an adjective, sometimes a noun, sometimes a verb, and sometimes an expletive. Such terms may come at the beginning of sentences, at the end of sentences, between words, or even between the syllables of words. Such ability of use indicates a probable social variable as well as any psychodynamic variable which may engender the use of such language. The sailor is expected to swear. The boot, then, observing the language habits of "real sailors," and having a need to communicate with them, picks up the use of obscenities along with such terms as "bulkhead" for wall and "scuttlebutt" for drinking fountain or rumors.

Ceremonies and ritual become less strange and more a part of everyday life. The Company Commander seems less "different" and less fearsome now, and "sea stories" about his prowess have become a central topic for bull sessions. Isolation among the members of the company diminishes and is replaced by fraternization as the company develops acceptable counter moves and finds new others with whom they can contrast themselves. All these occurrences present the boot with a clearer definition of the role he is expected to enact in the training center and the role the training center will play for him.

According to Sarbin, there is a continuum of role behavior, ranging from a differentiation of role and self (minimal involvement, few organic systems aroused,

little effort engendered; e.g., role of customer in a supermarket) to a state where role and self are undifferentiated (maximal involvement, entire organic system involved, much effort engendered; e.g., role of accursed in Voodoo death).¹⁵ Goffman has described four points on such a continuum, ways in which an individual who is undergoing role dispossession-repossession within a total institution might react: (1) situational withdrawal; (2) intransigent role; (3) colonization; and (4) conversion.¹⁶ These four categories of behavior can be observed in the total institutional setting of the naval recruit training center.

In the first type of reaction, situational withdrawal, the training center's challenge to the comfortable civilian self of the recruit encourages him to retreat within the walls of his civilianity—to shut himself off from the threat of depersonalization. Such an individual may be administratively discharged from the Navy during the "R and O" phase. If not, he suffers internal torment for the first three weeks of boot camp, and then, as the rest of the company members enact their new roles in the second phase, he suffers additional torment as an ostracized "other."

The intransigent recruit vociferously verbalizes his gross discontent with the Navy and its ways; but he becomes, in fact, deeply involved in the total institution. His careful study of institutional expectations in order to protest them serves to contribute to his enactment of the very expectations he is admonishing.

The colonized recruit "finds a home in the Navy." His previous experience with civilian society has been one marked by relative deprivation, and Navy life provides him with the first real security he has ever known. As one chief petty officer put it:

I left the cotton fields and joined the man's Navy. They gave me a place to sleep, good clothes, and all I could eat. Then, one day, they paid me, and I thought they were crazy.¹⁷

In conversion as a method of adjustment, the recruit becomes "gung ho," a "red hot." He completely

accepts and performs the role in accordance with the expectations of the training center. He wears his hat at the same angle as the Company Commander, emulates his jargon, gestures, and perhaps even his seamanlike gait. The convert is often rewarded with minor positions of authority within the recruit company.

In summary, then, the naval recruit training center, operating as a total institution, rigidly controls the environment of the recruit. During a nine-week period, the function of the center can be viewed as challenging the boot's initial civilian self concept, attempting to depersonalize and role-dispossess him and offering the sanctioned role of sailor to him for enactment.

Endnotes

¹Goffman, Erving, *Asylums* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), p. xiii.

²Field Notes.

³Goffman, *op. cit.*, pp. 237-238.

⁴Hollingshead, August, "Adjustment to Military Life," *American Journal of Sociology*, 51, March, 1946, p. 442.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 447.

⁶Brotz and Wilson, *op. cit.*, p. 374.

⁷Warren, Roland R., "The Naval Reserve Officer: A Study in Assimilation," *American Sociological Review*, 11, April 1946, p. 205.

⁸Dornbusch, Sanford, "The Military Academy as an Assimilating Institution," *Social Forces*, 33 (May, 1955).

⁹Field Notes.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Goffman, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

¹²Elkin, Frederick, "The Soldier's Language," *American Journal of Sociology*, 51, March, 1946, p. 414.

¹³See Janis, *op. cit.*, pp. 172-174, and H. Elkin, "Aggressive and Erotic Tendencies in Army Life," *American Journal of Sociology*, 51, March 1946, pp. 408-413.

¹⁴Elkin, *op. cit.*, p. 419.

¹⁵Sarbin, Theodore, "Role Theory," in *Handbook of Social Psychology*, ed. Gardner Lindzey (Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1954), pp. 233-234.

¹⁶Goffman, *op. cit.*, pp. 61-63.

¹⁷Field Notes.

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Review

1. Explain the four ways in which the pressures of the Navy recruit training center challenge the new "boot's" life, influencing his understanding and acceptance of himself as a "civilian."
2. Apply Goffman's definition of a total institution to the navy recruit training center.
3. What are the major differences between the "R & O" period and the advanced recruit stage with regard to the center of orientation?
4. List and illustrate the four points on the continuum of role behavior for an individual who is undergoing role dispossession-repossession within a total institution, according to Goffman.

Application

Interview someone who is in or has been in the Navy or other branch of the armed forces. Develop an interview questionnaire which addresses the following:

- a. The adjustment process from a civilian frame of reference to one of the military standard.
- b. Major difficulties experienced in boot camp.
- c. How sense of self and identity changed through the recruitment and training process and as a sense of group emerged.
- d. Perception of the purposes and values of boot camp.
- e. Importance of buddies.
- f. Perception of the institutional privilege system, its value, and importance.
- g. Importance and use of "taboo" language.
- h. Perception of various ways in which recruits adjusted to the recruitment training process.

Summarize your findings.