



Total Institutions and Reinvented Identities (Identity Studies in the Social Sciences)

Susie, Dr Scott

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Total institutions are places to which people are confined around the clock, in isolation from all other influences and social relationships. Hospitals, prisons and boarding schools create unique social worlds of rituals, routines and sanctions, which pervade every aspect of daily life and have a lasting effect upon their residents. This book revisits and updates Erving Goffman's pessimistic critique of the total institution, which had focused on the 'mortifying' effects of enforced identity erasure in austere and controlling environments. Susie Scott argues that a new organizational form has emerged in the culture of late modernity, which involves subtler mechanisms of social control and whose members cite more positive meanings and motivations. The Reinventive Institution (RI) is one to which members voluntarily commit themselves, willingly discarding their former identities to pursue transformative regimes of self-improvement and identity reinvention: they range from therapeutic clinics to spiritual retreats, academic hothouses, secret societies and virtual communities. Why do people choose to enter and remain in such institutions, and how does the experience change them? Taking a Symbolic Interactionist approach, this work focuses on the encounters that take place between members as they perform their identities in the drama of institutional life. The concept of 'performative regulation' is introduced to theorize the RI's power structure, as members' commitment is shown to be mediated by peer surveillance and mutual sanctioning. This raises important questions about the relative influence of agency, conflict and social control in the authorship of the self.

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