

THE PROMISE OF TOTAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS: IMPLICATIONS OF REGIMENTAL AND MONASTIC OBEDIENCE FOR UNDERLIFE

Mikaela Sundberg^{a,b}

^aDepartment of Sociology, Stockholm University, Sweden

^bSCORE, Stockholm University, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Goffman's (1961) work on total institutions has been relatively neglected in the fields of organizational research. This paper compares the conceptions of obedience to authority in two different types of voluntary total institutions and how such conceptions affect interaction contrary to the aims of the organizations. Consequently, by addressing how conceptions of authority and constructions of the obedient self shape conditions for underlife, the analysis provides knowledge about the variety of ways in which total institutional authority works and contributes to the understanding of the mechanisms of organizational underlife.

Keywords: Total institutions; authority; obedience; research paper; underlife

Sociological Thinking in Contemporary Organizational Scholarship
Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Volume 90, 253–269



Copyright © 2024 by Mikaela Sundberg. Published by Emerald Publishing Limited. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) licence. Anyone may reproduce, distribute, translate and create derivative works of this work (for both commercial and non-commercial purposes), subject to full attribution to the original publication and authors.

The full terms of this licence may be seen at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode>

ISSN: 0733-558X/doi:10.1108/S0733-558X2024000090010

INTRODUCTION

Sociologists of organization have studied all kinds of organizing and organizations, from many different perspectives. Erving Goffman's (1961) work on total institutions has been relatively "neglected" (Clegg, 2006b) however, and inspired few studies and discussions within the fields of organizational research (for exceptions, see, e.g., Clegg et al., 2012; Sundberg, 2015a). This is a pity because of the insights into authority his perspective offers. Because the total institution is a "social hybrid, part residential community, part formal organization" (Goffman, 1961, p. 12), it challenges the boundary between organizational life and private life that studies of organizations often maintain (at least implicitly). As walled-in-units where people work, eat, and sleep, they break down the barriers typical of modern Western society. Containing the totality of the lives of those living there implies exercising a great deal of authority over them: "The handling of many human needs by the bureaucratic organization of whole blocks of people (...) is the key fact of total institutions," Goffman (1961, p. 6) says. This has led some scholars to view total institutions as showing the "dark" side of organization (Clegg, 2006a). Manning (2008, p. 683) claims that Goffman's (1961) analysis is "premised on the notion that a formal organization that denies what might be called humanity (...) cannot function" and Clegg's (2006b) discussion on the neglect of Goffman (1961) focuses primarily on its usefulness for understanding crimes against humanity. The scope of authority of total institutions is indeed extremely encompassing compared to most other types of organizations. Yet does this necessarily mean that total institutions only offer us a closer inspection of the malfunctioning and negative consequences of organization?

In this paper, I draw inspiration from Goffman's (1961) concept but take a neutral stance relative to the authority of total institutions. More specifically, I shift focus from the shaping of selves that sociological studies of total institutions often engage in, to analyze conceptions of obedience to authority and how such conceptions affect interaction contrary to the aims of the organizations. By comparing two different types of voluntary total institutions, this paper provides more detailed knowledge about the variations in how total institutional authority works.

THE CONCEPT OF THE TOTAL INSTITUTION

Goffman (1961) introduced the concept of the total institution in *Asylums*, a collection of four essays based on the ethnography of a psychiatric hospital in Washington, DC, where the vivid description of life in that specific context served as a case study of a significant phenomenon under extreme circumstances. The psychiatric ward is but one *example* among a whole set of different types of total institutions, all of which are characterized by closed residency, detailed regulation of everyday living, and a goal to change its inhabitants. These three characteristics may be present in various degrees, in other words, total institutions can be *more or less* closed, regulated, and focused on identity change. More specifically, Goffman

(1961, p. xiii) 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.” Based on their different functions, Goffman (1961, pp. 4–5) sketched five different types of total institutions. Care for the incapable, who are unintentionally harmful, includes psychiatric hospitals or, historically, homes for those with an infectious disease. Protection from the harmful and dangerous, who appear as intentionally threatening, is a second type, represented by institutions such as prisons and prison camps. The third type, care for the harmless, disabled, and incapable, includes homes for the elderly and orphanages. Monasteries are prime examples of the fourth type: sanctuaries for those who voluntarily retreat from society. The final type is those institutions that enable the collective pursuit of an educational or work task, such as boarding schools and military camps.

In subsequent work, scholars have applied Goffman’s concept of the total institution to studies of prisons (e.g., Crewe et al., 2014; McCorkel, 1998), residential youth care (e.g., Wästerfors, 2012), extermination camps (Clegg et al., 2012), homes for the elderly (e.g., Bennett, 1963; Gubrium, 1997), army/garrison life (e.g., Kirke, 2010; Sundberg, 2015a), and monasteries (e.g., Clot-Garrell, 2022; Sundberg, 2022). Studies have also extended the concept to types not mentioned by Goffman, like the kibbutz system (Goldenberg & Wekerle, 1972), folk high schools (Fürst, 2022), and different types of ships (e.g., Reyes, 2018; Tracy, 2000; Zurcher, 1965). Shenkar (1996) even reflected on the total institutional characteristics of firms.¹ Such expansions can be fruitful but must pay attention to the defining characteristics of total institutions as social hybrids of both residency and work to not lose track of what is distinctive about them.

As a place of residence, life in total institutions differs from both a family household and solitary living not only by being a form of batch living but also by its rigid regulation and by the scheduling of all areas of life. Total institutions limit access to valued resources, including material possessions, time, personal space, control over one’s daily routines, personal contact with outsiders, and sometimes also with insiders. Entering total institutions generally involves having to ask for permission to do things adults are normally entitled to do. In doing so, total institutional residence entails the renunciation of individual sovereignty by giving up a significant amount of the autonomy that an adult typically has, at least relative to matters outside work life. The detail of regulations makes total institutional life distinctive: “[A]uthority of total institutions is directed to a multitude of items of conduct (...) that constantly occur and constantly come up for judgment” (Goffman, 1961, p. 41). Yet *who* is making those judgments depends on the characteristics of total institutions as workplaces. Total institutions exhibit different social differentiation and dynamics when it comes to the positions and roles of the people who frequent them. In the case of, for example, prisons, youth care, and homes for the elderly, staff work with inmates, and the division between these categories is sharp and definitive. Within the army, the division between enlisted men and officers often corresponds to a “staff–inmate” relationship. In monasteries, the division between staff and inmates is in-existent. I return to the implications of this for authority below.

THE TRADITIONAL FOCUS: SHAPING NEW SELVES

Goffman (1961) addresses the extensive authority and restrictions in terms of the effect on inmate identity. Restrictions form an essential part of the “mortification process” (Goffman, 1961, pp. 14–48) of total institutions ultimately aiming to form a new inmate self.² Because total institutional arrangements are intense and all-encompassing, one would expect them to be effective at resocializing, but total institutional “programs” do not always succeed. In the context of the psychiatric hospital in Goffman’s (1961) study, patients did not necessarily identify with the label as “mentally ill,” nor did they transform the way the staff’s “work” on them intended. Goffman (1961) also noted self-respecting tendencies, serving to distance actors from the roles ascribed to them by the institution and maintain a sense of their previous identity. More specifically, Goffman (1961, pp. 54–60, 188–207) distinguished between primary and secondary adjustments. Primary adjustment refers to how members who have learned the official rules act by following organizational expectations, whereas secondary adjustment refers to the tactics and strategies through which members use unauthorized means to achieve authorized goals, or vice versa. Consequently, these are two different ways in which socialized members deal with organizational expectations. What constitutes primary and secondary adjustments depend on the institutional arrangement, but both forms exist across all types of organizational life. Adjustments are not exclusively individual affairs, however. In their more collective versions, secondary adjustments in the psychiatric hospital (and elsewhere) constitute what Goffman refers to as the institutional *underlife*. As a distinctive interaction context with its own socialization and mechanisms of informal social control, it is a context of central concern in Goffman’s (1961) analysis of the psychiatric hospital.

How members resist, adapt, or internalize the identity imposed upon them is a common theme in subsequent studies of total institutions. For example, how residents’ self-conceptions change because of their interaction with staff and the restrictions (Bennett, 1963) or in contrast, how residents manage to enact imagined identities against rigid structures and work-related categories of the staff (Paterniti, 2000). The spatial organization of a total institution can shape the inmates’ behaviors and secondary adjustments often depend to some extent on “free space” where to perform them (cf. Goffman, 1961, pp. 230, 305). Different total institutions vary significantly concerning the existence of such spaces. Some studies reveal almost inescapable expectations, on emotional expression for example (Tracy, 2000), or control in “double” total institutions, such as drug treatment programs for incarcerated offenders (e.g., McCorkel, 1998).

A common misunderstanding is to see repressive power and forced change – “killing” the old self against the inmates’ will, as it were – as intrinsic to total institutions (see also Mouzelis, 1971, p. 114). Goffman’s (1961) introductory and at times inconsistent discussion certainly provides some support for such reasoning. For example, referring to total institutions as “forcing houses for changing people,” Goffman (1961, p. 12) implies that involuntary re-socialization is a central aspect of total institutions. This is also the empirical focus in *Asylums*. At the same time, Goffman (1961, pp. 46–48) mentions that the meaning of

“mortification” procedures is radically different depending on the institution in which they take place and also suggests the degree of self-regulated change and a spirit of entry as some of the ways in which total institutions differ (see [Goffman, 1961](#), pp. 113–123). Although the distinction is not always clear-cut empirically, analytically distinguishing between *coercive* and *voluntary* total institutions is important. For example, the adaptation, conception, and experience of authority among those who are affected by it must differ depending on if they have been forced, perhaps even locked in, into such places or whether they have willingly entered to submit. An active underlife is also likely to be less common and less significant in a voluntary total institution composed of, presumably, like-minded members who share the aim to transform their identity ([Scott, 2011](#)). Assuming that total institutions are “dark” is problematic concerning the latter cases, in part because it implies that the members of voluntary total institutions are “cultural dopes,” not understanding their own best (cf. [Scott, 2011](#)).

A NEW FOCUS: AUTHORITY AND OBEDIENCE IN VOLUNTARY TOTAL INSTITUTIONS

I suggest that voluntary total institutions offer research sites for studies of more or less total forms of authority. Authority implies that members have agreed in principle to adhere to decisions made ([Ahrne, 2021](#), p. 67). In one of the classic contributions to organization studies, [Barnard \(1968\)](#) suggested that a “zone of indifference,” within which subordinates accept without discussion the decision of superiors, is a precondition for authority in organizations (see [Lodrup-Hjorth & du Gay, 2024](#), this volume, for extensive discussion of other features of [Barnard’s \(1968\)](#) work). According to [Barnard \(1968, p. 169\)](#),

there are a number [of directives] which are clearly unacceptable, that is which will certainly not be obeyed, there is another group somewhat more or less on ... neutral lines And a third group unquestionably acceptable. This last group lies within “the zone of indifference.” The person affected will accept orders lying within this zone and is relatively indifferent to what the order is.

Because total institutional authority extends into what is commonly thought of as personal and private decisions, many directives of total institutions would in other organizations be regarded as unacceptable. In other words, the “zone” is, presumably, expected to be large among those who frequent voluntary total institutions. Given that the “functions” (goals, activities, etc.) of total institutions differ, it is relevant to reflect upon potential differences in the meaning of “indifference” however. [Courpasson and Dany \(2003\)](#) remark that the term zone of indifference seems to imply mindless, blind, and uncritical support of orders but argue that moral pillars must legitimize and sustain obedience. According to [Courpasson and Dany \(2003, p. 1241\)](#), obedience to authority is a social process where orders will be obeyed because subordinates share certain beliefs about the validity of the order (and about the person of their superior), related to the content of the zone of indifference. This view implies that obedience is connected

to the moral support of behavioral compliance. This discussion seems to focus primarily on how individual members relate to authority, but what are the implications for interaction?

If members of voluntary total institutions are more inclined to pursue interaction in line with the aim of the organization compared to coercive total institutions, this means that there is a limited underlife (see also [Scott, 2011](#)). Discussing the implications of [Goffman \(1961\)](#) for organization studies, [Manning \(2008, p. 685\)](#) claims that “[e]very organization has an underlife – the modes of interacting in place and times that are contrary to the stated instrumental aim of the organization.” The presence (and importance) of such interaction contexts points to one of the general ways in which [Goffman’s \(1961\)](#) work is relevant for the sociology of organizations. It is, furthermore, evident that the underlife is made up of different concrete modes of interaction and activities depending on the organization. Previous research points to the implications of “spaces” for engaging in them, as mentioned above. In the present paper, I contribute to the understanding of the mechanisms of organizational underlife by addressing how *conceptions* of authority and obedience shape *conditions* for underlife. Even if the zone of indifference is located in individual subordinates, the conceptions of obedience affect social interaction among those subordinates.

COMPARING VOLUNTARY TOTAL INSTITUTIONS: METHOD AND MATERIAL

My exploration of authority is based on comparing cases of two specific types of voluntary total institutions. How do the conceptions of obedience to authority in a professional military unit differ from monastic obedience and what are the implications for underlife? The comparison draws material from two multi-sited, qualitative case studies. The first study dealt with everyday life within regiments of the Foreign Legion (see [Sundberg, 2015a](#), for more details). At present, the force comprises around 9,000 men, based at 11 regiments, most of them located in southern France and 2 abroad. I conducted interviews, observations, and participant observations at the main administrative regiment, the education regiment, the cavalry regiment, and the parachute regiment. These regiments were chosen to create as much variation as possible regarding location and specialty. At all regiments except for the last, each visit lasted for about a week, and I visited one of the combat regiments twice.

I observed activities such as control of guard duties, office work, shooting exercises, language classes, etc., with a particular focus on vertical and horizontal social interaction. I also participated in informal gatherings such as lunch breaks and after-work beer at company clubs, and this involved many informal conversations with members of various nationalities and formal ranks. My 10 shorter visits to the main administrative regiment were mostly related to interviews and meetings regarding the other regimental visits because these visits required permission from the general in command. All visits and conversations were recorded in field notes. Importantly, spending time at regiments was crucial for observing

everyday life but also for selecting, getting in contact with, and gaining the confidence of my interviewees. I conducted interviews with 6 volunteer recruits (the term for the new members during their first five weeks), 27 enlisted members, 13 non-commissioned officers (henceforth NCOs), and 9 former members. To generate maximum richness, I have strived for as much variation as possible regarding formal rank and nationality. I have also interviewed 11 officers, 2 regimental social assistants, and 1 regimental priest. In total, my interviewees include 63 persons. Most interviews were conducted in French, 10 in Swedish, and 5 in English. Thirty-nine interviews were recorded, and I took field notes for the rest. The length of the interviews varied greatly. Most of the interviews at regiments lasted for about 30–60 minutes. A few interviews with officers and NCOs lasted around 1.5 hours. Whereas three of the interviews with former members in the retirement home for legionnaires were very short (15 minutes), an interview with another former member lasted for almost 6 hours in total. Interview guides for officers were tailored to their specific position, whereas most interviews with enlisted men and NCOs focused on different aspects of everyday life at the regiment, including working duties, experiences of rules and punishments, atmosphere, and social relations with superiors and other members of different and the same ranks.

The second study explored social relations in monastic communities of the Cistercian Order of Strict Observance (henceforth OCSO) in France (see [Sundberg, 2022](#), for details).³ To become acquainted with the monastic setting and tailor an adequate research design, I visited two monasteries in France. I stayed about one week each in the guest houses of one monk monastery within the Cistercian Order of Common Observance and one OCSO monastery for nuns, respectively, and interviewed two monks and one nun in these monasteries. I also interviewed a monk in a different community within the Cistercian Order of Common Observance and one former member of this community. Based on this preparatory work, I decided to concentrate on OCSO in France exclusively, because France is the country with the largest population of OCSO communities.⁴ Focusing on one country facilitated selection and access because members, especially superiors, can share useful information and offer helpful recommendations regarding other communities. The choice of France maximized available options along this principle.

In selecting communities to contact for the main study, I aimed for variation concerning gender, size, and strictness. I visited one large nun monastery four times and one average-sized nun monastery and two average-sized monk monasteries once. I stayed almost a week in each guesthouse and focused primarily on interviewing. Interviews include 20 nuns between 35 and 87 years old, with 8–68 years of experience of Cistercian monastic life, and 15 monks, between 39 and 78 years old, and with 9–51 years of experience of Cistercian monastic life. The members held various positions and were involved in various types of work. The interviews typically lasted for about an hour and a half (ranging from 45 minutes to 2 hours), and they were recorded and transcribed verbatim, except for the first, three early interviews when I took notes. All interviews were semi-structured, including questions on the entrance to monastic life, work, decision-making,

relations and contact with other members, including the superior, and contact with outsiders. I also adjusted questions to incorporate emerging insights in subsequent interviews.

During one of the visits to a nun monastery, I stayed four days within the community and joined the community in all its daily activities (offices, meals, work, meetings, etc.). Although the silent atmosphere of monasteries significantly reduces opportunities for the informal chats that are typical ingredients of ethnographic research, staying at monastic guesthouses allowed me to talk to other guests. This provided information and “gossip” about the communities that helped in the selection of communities to visit. In addition, I studied regulatory documents including the Rule of Saint Benedict and the Constitutions of the order, books on Cistercian spirituality, and webpages of the order and individual communities.

The types of voluntary total institutions included in these two studies share a great and explicit emphasis on obedience, but their “functions” differ. Contemplative monasteries are sanctuaries for religious men and women who voluntarily retreat from society. Professional military units like the French Foreign Legion enroll soldiers for them to collectively pursue the task of training and being prepared for armed defense. By comparing these cases, we gain a deeper understanding of how authority and obedience in voluntary total institutions differ. While taking the classification of such different sites as total institutions as a departure point, it must be pointed out that my analysis is not entirely “Goffmanesque,” in other words, focusing on situational interaction. Not only is this due to the material as interview based rather than observation based, but primarily because I concentrate on *conceptions* of obedience and *conditions* for underlife. This also means that the analysis is static rather than processual and not considering the socialization process of members and the methods and measures used for that (cf. Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; van Maanen, 1978).⁵

THE MEANING OF OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITY

The Foreign Legion enrolls men from all over the world and has a reputation as one of the world’s most notorious fighting forces. The Foreign Legion is formally part of the French Army and deployed to the same kinds of missions, but it is a distinct unit, with specific regiments, a separate recruitment process, and certain special rules of service for its members. To join the Foreign Legion, legionnaires sign a contract for five years, whereas subsequent times of service may differ in length, from days to several years. Armed forces exist to be able to fight, protect, or in some way help out in situations of crisis. The idea that soldiers will eventually participate in such a mission is important for motivating soldiers and proving the importance of obedience for performing the collective, coordinated actions necessary for completing such missions successfully. Yet as with most armed forces of the world, the men of the Foreign Legion spend most of the time training (and waiting) rather than fighting. Even if these activities are related, I address the total institutional conditions of everyday *regimental* life specifically. What is the understanding of obedience here?

Submission to authority is constitutive of military life. In practice, it is based on a detailed rank structure and execution of orders. An order is a communicative directive from a superior, telling a subordinate what to do.⁶ In the Foreign Legion, orders should be executed, without questions or hesitations. One captain explained⁷:

For me, the legionnaire is a man who doesn't think. That's the strength. If tomorrow the colonel says "Faros, tomorrow the company is going to meet at that place," Captain Faros says "All right, sir." I don't think about it. I can't say "yes, but well, tomorrow at 10 ..." No. If the colonel has said at 10, everybody is there, because the colonel has said so, you understand? We don't ask questions. Why, how, why?

This captain (referring to himself in the third person) prized legionnaires' supposed lack of reflection. Especially among superiors in the Foreign Legion, it is commonly stated that legionnaires are more obedient than other soldiers. This is a source of pride, presented as something positive, in line with the appreciation of obedience in the military, in general, and during combat, in particular. The conception of, or perhaps rhetoric of, obedience is not exclusive to those of high ranks, like Captain Faros. Legionnaires share the understanding that Foreign Legion has a traditional "shut-up-and-do-what-you're-told" culture where subordinates should not "talk back" – perhaps more so than in many other Western armed forces (see [Sundberg, 2015b](#)). For example, Oleg, a corporal at the instruction regiment tried to explain what the Foreign Legion was like by saying that questions are not allowed and one should not hesitate to "reflect" or think twice about an order: If a superior says $1 + 1$ is 3, then that is the way it is. Importantly, however, superiors only expect subordinates to execute orders promptly. Whether subordinates have second thoughts or feelings about them is less relevant ([Sundberg, 2015a](#), 198f.).

The Order of Cistercians of the strict observance is a contemplative, cloistered order. Within the Cistercian tradition, the primary purpose of monastic membership is to deepen the relationship with Christ, within the context of a monastic community. Entering a monastery is supposed to be the starting point of a journey of conversion, meant to involve a growing out of a life centered on the own ego, to a life centered on Christ – but loving the other sisters/brothers in the monastery is also a significant aspect of this ([Sundberg, 2022](#)). Membership in a monastic order is based on an active choice to seek out this style of living, and the profession to become a Cistercian monk or nun involves three promises (see, e.g., [OCSO, 2018](#)), casting the sacrifices, and "mortification," they imply in a positive and desirable light. The vow of stability is a promise to live the rest of one's life with one monastic community – it is a permanent engagement, in contrast to legionnaires' temporary submission to military authority. The vow of conversion of manners is the promise to live the monastic life, in all its parts, as described by the Rule of Saint Benedict and the Constitutions of the Order, signifying a voluntary commitment to change. The vow of obedience is a promise to obey the superior (the abbot or abbess) and put one's own will aside. Monastic obedience refers to external behavior but also to an inner state. In monasteries, "[o]bedience must be given gladly"; it is unacceptable to obey "grudgingly" or to

grumble, “not only aloud but also in his heart” (Rule of Saint Benedict, Chapter 5, see also [Merton, 2009](#), p. 121).⁸

The monastic conception of obedience is different from the behavioral focus in the Foreign Legion but also because it is justified by a blending of social and divine authority. According to Catholic catechism, obedience to God is unlimited and Catholicism prepares monastic members for the more encompassing and concrete submission subscribed by the Rule of Saint Benedict, comprising critical moral pillars that members have chosen to follow by entering a monastery. Abbots and abbesses serve under God and the Rule of Saint Benedict, but as superiors, they both represent the divine authority (Christ) a formal, social authority (cf. the Rule of Saint Benedict, Chapter 2). Obedience to a monastic superior is therefore connected to faith.

Besides meeting about seven times a day in church, sharing meals in the refectory, and meeting in the chapter room, OCSO members devote approximately five hours a day, six days a week to some form of work. Cistercian monasteries typically fabricate, pack, and sell some food products. All monasteries have a guesthouse and a shop. Much work also derives from the fact that the community is a place of residence. Members take care of gardening, laundry, sewing, and maintenance and rotate to help out with household chores (and church services). There is someone responsible for every, more or less extensive, sector of the monastery, whether it is production, packaging, or sales. This often includes the supervision of one or several members assisting in subordinate roles. The expectations regarding obedience apply to all sorts of supervision in the monastic organization of duties but also, in a general sense, concerning all other members. According to the Rule of Saint Benedict, “[o]bedience is a blessing to be shown by all, not only the abbot but also to one another as brothers, because we know that it is by this way of obedience that we go to God” (Fry, 1981, p. 68). This means that those monks and nuns who admit that they experience their immediate superior as too “dominant” also recognize that such *feelings* are themselves problematic – even if they follow the directives of these superiors (see [Sundberg, 2022](#), pp. 93–100, see also [Americo et al., 2024](#), this volume, on emotional reflexivity in organization studies). In sum, Legion obedience is focused on the execution of specific commands and requests, whereas Cistercian monastic obedience extends to having a submissive approach to everything required, extending to both feelings and thoughts.

HOW CONCEPTIONS OF OBEDIENCE SHAPE CONDITIONS FOR UNDERLIFE

We have so far considered obedience primarily concerning work tasks, but “directives” of voluntary total institutions stretch beyond such activities. A key aspect of total institutions is the breakdown of the boundary between private and professional areas of life. How this plays out in practice differs depending on the total institutional arrangements, especially considering how private life can be maintained outside of residential quarters or through spontaneous activities; in other words, what the conditions for underlife are.

For new legionnaires, never-ending requests are central features of regimental life, meaning that they have little private time and difficulties in leaving regimental grounds. John, a legionnaire at the parachute regiment at Corse, said that there were “no freedom” and “no free time” at the beginning of his service. John explained:

There’s end of work but there’s always something to do at the platoon. You can ask [the corporal] to go somewhere and he might say ‘Yeah, what’s the weight of the FAMAS [the type of rifle used]?’ If you don’t know, go to your room and revise. (...) There are loads of songs. You might have to learn these songs, so you don’t really have time to do anything. Or you clean the whole weekend and things like that.

Consequently, official work hours can be over, but Legion regiments are also places of residence. For legionnaires, their life is very much taking place within their platoon. One salient aspect of platoon life is the persistent possibility of inspections, typically extending into nighttime and weekends. There were frequent complaints about how “unnecessary” this practice, referred to as *sketch*, is. “Sketch here is, for example, that they put so much time into inspecting your locker, if everything is properly ironed and your clothes are folded correctly, that’s sketch. Perhaps it’s not really needed but it’s done anyway,” Antonio, a corporal at the parachute regiment explained. Antonio continued:

When [corporals] keep, during the weekend, doing a lot of stupid things with the guys, like checking lockers and I don’t know what, all kinds of things, that’s unnecessary, it’s not needed. Because you don’t learn anything, you only teach [legionnaires] to be quiet maybe.⁹

Expectations of silent obedience to authority extend beyond orders of command to all kinds of duties, and members are socialized into this through inspection practices. As indicated above, it does not imply agreement. Muttering to each other about superiors, tasks, equipment, work hours, etc. is common (so is also muttering about muttering!). This means that frustration with the system, “incompetent” superiors, and “stupid” orders are common topics of conversation, not something kept to oneself.

Interventions into more or less “free” time aside, all legionnaires can request permission to leave the regiment during evenings and weekends, *if* the document is filled out correctly and handed in on time, the uniform, boots, and white *képi* is impeccable, etc. Stories about how legionnaires have been banned from leaving because a crease was not in place or the white *képi* had a stain, abound. This is a good example of the bureaucratic organization of everyday life and the requirement to ask for permission to do things, at the same time as legionnaires circumvent these obstacles both individually and collectively. Sometimes legionnaires leave without permission, by themselves or in groups, if they have the opportunity to do so. For example, at the parachute regiments, it happens that members sneak out in civilian clothes through a hole in the fence surrounding the regiment. Such illicit activities may require special precautions to avoid negative consequences, however. Paul, a junior legionnaire offered an example:

If you’re going through the fence Friday night in civilian clothing you tell the corporal, “so you know I’m gone,” kind of like that. If you know the corporal There’s a sheet of paper showing how many we are; at night he signs you up.

This is but one example of how legionnaires engage collectively in illicit activities and/or rely on cooperation with other legionnaires to perform them. These secondary adjustments aim for instrumental, short-term gains; they represent frictions (Rubin, 2015) engaged in to make total institutional life more bearable, not understood as challenging the commitment to legionnaire identity or the system. They are probably also, to some extent, accepted by the system as loopholes for legionnaires to retain a sense of autonomy, remaining more disciplined when more important matters are at stake. All aspects of Legion life (i.e., regimental life) are just not to be taken too seriously, and while compliance with rules and regulations is preferable, it is acceptable to talk about how ridiculous some of them are. While this is a way to let steam off, it also legitimizes some circumvention of them and more confidence in bringing others along in doing so. Nevertheless, these activities constitute Legion underlife; collective adjustments that are often present as soon as superiors are out of sight and legionnaires are not requested to do anything or be anywhere specific.

In the context of the all-encompassing obedience of Cistercian monasteries, the distinction between more or less important tasks and requests is blurry due to the conception of tasks as *services* (Sundberg, 2022, pp. 89–92). One must also keep in mind that the “mission” of the OCSO is ultimately for Cistercian monks and nuns to maintain a relationship with, worshiping, and serving an omnipresent God. The common residence is a way to do so with others – there are no external “missions” beyond that. Even if monks and nuns occasionally ask for a couple of weeks of “vacation” to visit family or rest, it is simply incomprehensible that they would desire to leave the monastic grounds as soon as they had some “free time” – which they, in any case, have very little of. Consequently, their secondary adjustments do not concern such activities, and I will not discuss other specific secondary adjustments like those mentioned in the Foreign Legion either. In contrast, I draw attention to a key aspect shaping the fundamental *condition* for engaging in collective secondary adjustments in monasteries of the OCSO: The requirement to avoid conversations.

Silence is one of the principal monastic values of the OCSO. It is an assurance of solitude for the nun/monk in the community in relation to fellow members and a way for the member to engage in continual prayer and conversation with God. Silence “is to be observed especially in the regular places such as the church, the cloisters, the refectory and the scriptorium” (Constitution Part 2, C. 24, ST 24:A). Elsewhere, there may be legitimate reasons for speaking:

Monks typically have three motivations to speak to one another: to get a particular work project carried out efficiently, to engage in a community discussion, or to discuss one’s spiritual progress with a director or confessor. Sometimes, too, Trappists will enjoy friendly conversations with each other in a conversation room or nature. These different types of conversation are balanced with the discipline of fostering a general atmosphere of silence in the monastery. (Trappists, 2017)

“The monk must train himself to guard his tongue” (Merton, 2009, p. 175), not only concerning keeping quiet unless there is a good reason to speak but when

talking, also carefully considering what to say and how (cf. Cummings, 1986, p. 143). No forms of muttering (neither silent nor aloud) or gossip are legitimate.

While restrictions on speech apply to both monks and nuns, there are nevertheless significant differences between what possibilities monks and nuns in the studied communities have to interact with one another (see [Sundberg, 2022](#), Chapter 7, for details). The monks are entitled to ask each other for, at least occasional, private conversations in parlors, without asking their abbot for permission. They could also establish more long-term relationships with other monks by choosing them as their own personal “spiritual guide” and/or confessor (for the sacrament of reconciliation). Nuns are in principle expected to hold private conversations exclusively with their abbess and ask her for permission if they wish to talk in private – a permission which the abbess was entitled to decline. The only legitimate confidant for ordinary nuns, except for their confessor (the priest serving in their community) is their abbess. Nuns are expected to share their thoughts with and “open their hearts” to their abbess, something monks are much less expected to do to their abbots. Marie Rose explained the necessity of having meetings with the abbess:

for what Saint Benedict calls opening of the heart, that means being able to say, because she represents Christ so ... so the bond with the abbess is strong because ... it's the bond of obedience to ... and obedience has to be lived well (...) so it has to be very ... that the relation with the abbess is really *clear ... open ...*

Consequently, being open to the abbess is an aspect of obeying the abbess. Although they sometimes found sharing difficult, the nuns typically raised no criticism related to this expectation. There were exceptions, however. One untypically critical nun, Maribel, mentioned to me on repeated occasions her troubles with “authority” and said that she “refused” to talk to her abbess because she did not have a “very happy relationship with her.” Illicitly, Maribel opened up to “a sister who is very discrete and who repeats nothing” instead. The “discrete” nun supposedly differed from the rest, who were suspected to report to the abbess: “*Everything* passes through the mother abbess and *everything*, everything, and a lot of our speech and our doings are repeated to the abbess,” Maribel said. What Maribel said illustrates how nuns must be cautious about whom they (illicitly) chat with and what they tell them, not least because the reliance on the abbess as a conversation partner may result in a blurring between vertical reporting and horizontal gossip (cf. [Scott, 2011](#)) leading to her receiving more information about what is going on in the community than would otherwise be the case. In sum, expectations of an obedient mind-set and limited talk create poor conditions for maintaining an underlife among monks but even more so among nuns, where the required openness to the abbatial gaze may also lead to a sense of distrust among the ordinary nuns, making an underlife even less likely. Although the comparison of monks and nuns concerned a single type of total institution (contemplative monasteries), it suggests how total institutions offer the possibility to compare cases of organizations with an exceptionally high degree of similarity, *except* for in their gender composition. In other words, typically gender-segregated total

institutions such as boarding schools, prisons, and monasteries offer valuable sites for exploring the gendering of organizations.

CONCLUDING REMARK

Goffman's (1961) demonstration of how the self is shaped and reshaped by patterns of interaction in specific institutional arrangements is well recognized in sociology. It has inspired many studies of identity formation and adjustments to the socialization conditions in, especially coercive, closed settings. In contrast, my ambition with this paper has been to show how *voluntary* total institutions are relevant sites of research for studying authority, not least since voluntary, rather than coercive, membership is the most common in modern organizations.

This paper has been limited to tracing ways to conceptualize obedience in two cardinal cases of voluntary total institutions, contemplative (cloistered) monasteries and professional armed force units, and linked this to how conditions for sustaining separate interaction contexts of collective adjustments (an underlife) differ there. The existence of differences is of course not surprising given the separate "functions" of the institutions. While pointing out some dimensions in which total institutions differ, Goffman (1961, pp. 113–123) did not present any detailed comparative analysis. The concept of the total institution applies to organizations of very different kinds and subsequent studies, whether they use the total institution concept or not, rarely treat them in tandem, but discuss them separately as organizations engaged in medical treatment, education, law enforcement, etc. One of the benefits of comparing cases of total institutions is that they are regarding certain aspects of organizational life extreme, regarding the scope of authority, for example. Yet at the same time, they also represent maximum variation cases within a specific, narrow category (cf. Flyvbjerg, 2006, pp. 229–230): The French Foreign Legion as a professional military force and Cistercian monasteries are both voluntary total institutions emphasizing obedience, but conceptions of obedience of the able body when needed in the Legion, on the one hand, contrast with a monastic form of total obedience present at all times, on the other hand. This shows the *multidimensionality* of obedience as a phenomenon.

Obedience in the Foreign Legion refers to external behavior. Soldiers should be executing and submitting to frequent and specific orders issued by a superior. Obedience does not extend much beyond that. There is a flourishing underlife, which serves to let "steam off," rather than challenge the organization, especially during long periods of regimental training (rather than military operations). Cistercian obedience is more of an internal affair; a form of inner state of generalized submissiveness, applying to all members. Everyone is responsible for upholding it for the sake of oneself, at all times and everywhere (cf. Sundberg, 2019). Not doing so would itself be contrary to the "aim" of the organization, which is to provide the premises for the *members* to develop and maintain a close relationship with God (cf. Sundberg, 2022). This undermines engagement in collective behaviors contrary to the monastic "mission," not least

through restrictions on personal conversations. At the same time, one could view any collective secondary adjustment in monasteries as more defiant compared to the activities described among legionnaires, precisely because of the monastic conception of obedience as a form of total submission, encompassing behaviors, thoughts, *and* feelings. Although my analysis has not focused on interaction per se, it points to the importance of understanding constructions of the obedient self as linked to underlife, as a distinct interaction context of organizations, and hence, a key sociological dimension of the inner life of organizations.

NOTES

1. A great deal of research on various total institutions has been conducted without explicit reference to Goffman's concept (see also McEwen, 1980), or only briefly mentioning of it. In this paper, I primarily cite work that builds upon Goffman's (1961) concept and/or fundamental tenets.

2. The mortification process refers to the attempt to strip inmates of their past selves to take on the new role defined by the institution. The possibility to "kill" the self is related to Goffman's (1961, p. 168) understanding of the self "as something that resides in the arrangements prevailing in a social system for its members." Institutional arrangements "do not so much support the self as constitute it" (Goffman, 1961, p. 168).

3. The Cistercian order was founded in 1098 but split into two branches in 1892. In an attempt to follow the Rule of Saint Benedict more rigorously, the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO), commonly known as Trappists, detached itself while Cistercians of the Common Observance remained loyal to the original form. I focus on OCSO, which is presently larger than the order of Common Observance. OCSO currently has a total of about 3,000 members and 157 monasteries in 45 countries around the world, 70 for nuns and 87 for monks (2021). For statistics, see <https://ocso.org/monasteries/current-statistics/>.

4. About half (83) of all the monasteries are located in Europe and 23 of those in France.

5. Punishment regimes are typically installed to enforce and maintain desirable behavior. For detailed analysis of the punishment regime of the French Foreign Legion, see Sundberg (2015b, Chapter 6) and for analysis of sanctions in Cistercian monasteries, see Sundberg (2022, Chapter 8).

6. Military orders can be different in scope and delivered verbally as well as in written form. I focus on verbal, direct orders.

7. The Foreign Legion comprises three principal groups. I refer to enlisted men as legionnaires. Legionnaires come from all over the world (they can be French) and typically live in lodgments at the regiment. Legionnaires can be promoted to non-commissioned officers and then live outside the regiment. Finally, there are officers on rotation from the French Army. A few selected NCOs are offered the possibility to serve as an "officer under foreign title" and enter the officer corps instead. Captain Faros is an example of such an officer.

8. The Rule was written for monks and thus men. Its relevance for nuns, thus women, was questioned during the early stages of Cistercian monastic development (see, e.g., Lawrence, 2015, p. 203), but this no longer seems to be an issue. Both monks and nuns spontaneously refer to the Rule during interviews, through specific citations and in a more sweeping manner, with no indication that it applies differently to the two member categories.

9. The expression *sketch* signifies that there is something unserious, almost funny, about it. This is reminiscent of Mouzelis' (1971, p. 116) discussion of obligatory military service in Greece, where the mortification processes during training should be seen as a joke or a game (and those who do take it seriously are considered foolish). Viewing them this way may be a way of coping, but in the Foreign Legion, inspections and other forms of *sketch*-activities are also a way to learn what is expected.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank the editors, the anonymous reviewer, Barbara Czarniawska, John Murray, and Adrienne Sörbom for valuable comments, remarks, and criticisms.

REFERENCES

- Ahrne, G. (2021). *The construction of social bonds. A relational theory of globalization, organizations and society*. Edward Elgar.
- Alvesson, M., & Willmott, H. (2002). Identity regulation as organizational control: Producing the appropriate individual. *Journal of Management Studies*, 39, 619–644.
- Americo, B. L., Clegg, S., & Carniel, F. (2024). Narrating the disjunctions produced by the sociological concept of emotional reflexivity in organization studies. In S. Clegg, M. Grothe-Hammer, & K. Serrano Velarde (Eds.), *Sociological thinking in contemporary organizational scholarship* (Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Vol. 90, pp. 227–252). Emerald Publishing.
- Barnard, C. (1968). *The functions of the executive*. Harvard University Press.
- Bennett, R. (1963). The meaning of institutional life. *The Gerontologist*, 3, 117–125.
- Clegg, S. R. (2006a). The heart of darkness. In S. R. Clegg, D. Courpasson, & N. Philip (Eds.), *Power and organizations* (pp. 143–189). Sage.
- Clegg, S. R. (2006b). Why is organization theory so ignorant? The neglect of total institutions. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 15, 426–430.
- Clegg, S. R., Pina, E., Cunha, M., & Rego, A. (2012). The theory and practice of utopia in a total institution: The pineapple panopticon. *Organization Studies*, 33, 1735–1757.
- Clot-Garrell, A. (2022). Boundaries in the making: Transformations in Erving Goffman's total institution through the case of a female Benedictine monastery. *Sociology*, 56, 114–130.
- Courpasson, D., & Dany, F. (2003). Indifference or obedience? Business firms as democratic hybrids. *Organization Studies*, 24, 1231–1260.
- Crewe, B., Warr, J., Bennett, P., & Smith, A. (2014). The emotional geography of prison life. *Theoretical Criminology*, 18, 56–74.
- Cummings, C. (1986). *Monastic practices*. Liturgical Press.
- Flyvbjerg, B. (2006). Five misunderstandings about case-study research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12, 219–245.
- Fry, T. (Ed.). (1981). *The rule of Saint Benedict*. Vintage Books.
- Fürst, H. (2022). Arrival to a fictional total institution. The Swedish Folk High School as a Liminal Space in Literature. *Sociologisk Forskning*, 59, 321–340.
- Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums. Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates*. Anchor Books.
- Goldenberg, S., & Wekerle, G. R. (1972). From utopia to total institution in a single generation: The Kibbutz and the Bruderhof. *International Review of Modern Sociology*, 2, 224–232.
- Gubrium, J. F. (1997). *Living and dying at Murray Manor*. The University Press of Virginia.
- Kirke, C. (2010). 'Orders is orders ... aren't they?' Rule bending and rule breaking in the British Army. *Ethnography*, 11, 359–380.
- Lawrence, C. H. (2015). *Medieval monasticism: Forms of religious life in Western Europe in the middle ages* (4th ed.). Routledge.
- Lopdrup-Hjorth, T., & du Gay, P. (2024). Facing up to the present? Cultivating political judgement and a sense of reality in contemporary organizational life. In S. Clegg, M. Grothe-Hammer, & K. Serrano Velarde (Eds.), *Sociological thinking in contemporary organizational scholarship* (Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Vol. 90, pp. 85–108). Emerald Publishing.
- Manning, P. (2008). Goffman on organizations. *Organization Studies*, 29, 677–699.
- McCorkel, J. A. (1998). Going to the crackhouse: Critical space as a form of resistance in total institutions and everyday life. *Symbolic Interaction*, 21, 227–252.
- McEwen, C. A. (1980). Continuities in the study of total and non-total institutions. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 6, 143–185.
- Merton, T. (2009). *The rule of Saint Benedict. Initiation into the monastic tradition 4* (P. F. O'Connell (Ed.)). Liturgical Press.

- Mouzelis, N. P. (1971). On total institutions. *Sociology*, 5, 113–120.
- Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO). (2018). *FAQs*. Retrieved February 27, 2018, from <http://www.ocso.org/who-we-are/faqs/>
- Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO). (2021). *Current statistics*. Retrieved January 23, 2022, from <https://ocso.org/monasteries/current-statistics/>
- Paterniti, D. (2000). The micropolitics of identity in adverse circumstance: A study of identity making in a total institution. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 29, 93–119.
- Reyes, V. (2018). Port of call: How ships shape foreign-local encounters. *Social Forces*, 96, 1097–1118.
- Rubin, A. T. (2015). Resistance or friction: Understanding the significance of prisoners' secondary adjustments. *Theoretical Criminology*, 19, 23–42.
- Scott, S. (2011). *Total institutions and reinventive identities*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Shenkar, O. (1996). The firm as a total institution: Reflections on the Chinese state enterprise. *Organization Studies*, 17, 885–907.
- Sundberg, M. (2015a). *A sociology of the total organization: Atomistic unity in the French Foreign Legion*. Routledge.
- Sundberg, M. (2015b). Hierarchy, status and combat motivation in the French Foreign Legion. In A. King (Ed.), *Frontline: Combat and cohesion in Iraq and Afghanistan* (pp. 216–233). Oxford University Press.
- Sundberg, M. (2022). *Fraternal relations in monasteries: The laboratory of love*. Routledge.
- Tracy, S. J. (2000). Becoming a character for commerce – Emotion labor, self-subordination, and discursive construction of identity in a total institution. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 14, 90–128.
- Trappists (Brothers & Sisters, Cistercians of the Strict Observance). (2017). *Becoming a Trappist monk or nun*. Retrieved April 24, 2017, from <http://www.trappists.org/becoming-trappist/vows>
- Van Maanen, J. (1978). People processing: Strategies of organizational socialization. *Organizational Dynamics*, 7, 19–36.
- Wästerfors, D. (2012). Analyzing social ties in total institutions. *Qualitative Sociology Review*, 8, 12–27.
- Zurcher, L. A. (1965). The sailor aboard ship: A study of role behavior in a total institution. *Social Forces*, 43, 389–400.