
Beyond Erving Goffman's 'total institution': Rethinking institutions for persons with disabilities from the perspective of *dispositif* analysis

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Résumé

When we examine disability as a category of human differentiation, we will find the centuries-long and worldwide practice of 'institutionalisation'. Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman was instrumental in examining and questioning the role of "institutions established to care for persons" (Goffman 1961, 4). In *Asylums* he described the characteristics of these 'total institutions' and their effects on both 'the inmates' and the 'supervisory staff' (Goffman 1961). Today, his work is considered a catalyst for the psychiatric reforms, deinstitutionalisation efforts and the so-called 'normalisation principle' in Western industrialised countries. Thanks mainly to the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, we can even observe an accelerating trend towards independent living in many countries in recent years. On the other hand, the Covid19 crisis and related containment measures have shown that the prison-like institution is still alive.

Against this background the following questions arise: What role does the 'total institution' play in contemporary society? How important are institutions for persons with disabilities in general? Based on results of our research project, entitled "Dispositifs of 'Dis/ability' in Transformation", which is funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), we will argue against a sole or too strong focus on Goffman's 'total institution'.

First, we offer a critical reading of Goffman's *Asylums* from a disability studies perspective. *Second*, we reflect on the general meaning of institution as an analytical category. This term is relevant to various discourses such as cultural anthropology, sociology, political science etc. An interdisciplinary understanding helps to clarify that Goffman's 'total institution' ultimately describes only one particular type, namely bureaucratic organisation, while ignoring the other important facets of the term.

Third, we argue for a change of the perspective. If one wants to grasp the meaning of dis/ability for and in our present, i.e., in the context of liberal capitalism, European welfare states, human rights and more or less subtle forms of 'governing our mentalities', it makes more sense to draw on Michel Foucault's (1980) concept of 'dispositif'. In his thinking, institutions play a significant role as central components of "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions [sic], architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements [...]" (Foucault 1980, 194)

If we refrain from focusing only on 'the total institution', but consider 'institutions' in the plural, in a broader sense and as 'elements' of a more complex 'apparatus', which "itself is

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the system of relations that can be established between these elements” (Foucault 1980, 194), we will see the role and functioning of the dis/ability divide in a new light. It will no longer appear merely as an effect of oppression and social control, as research might claim with the ‘total institution’ as its conceptual background. Rather, it is a complicated, dynamic and contingent arrangement of both ‘rigid’ and ‘flexible’ normalisation strategies, in which disability as ‘otherness’ is constantly being re-constructed, negotiated and re-produced.