

“We’re mean Marines, sir.”: Involuntary resocialization as illustrated by Full Metal Jacket

Aishah Harden, Simon Fraser University

Abstract

This paper was originally written for Lindsey Freeman’s Sociology 150 course *Introduction to Sociology*. The assignment asked students to analyze a film of their choice using a sociological concept or theory. The paper uses APA citation style.

The concept of resocialization has been described as the active mechanism by which people adapt to the changes brought on by secondary socialization- socialization that typically occurs later in one’s life, outside of the family and within a subgroup of society. (Steckley, 2017). Secondary socialization may very well involve being moved into a radically different social environment (L. Freeman, personal communication, September 24, 2018) presenting with expectations that contradict those defined by the agents of one’s primary socialization. (Steckley, 2017). For this reason, resocialization may involve both the unlearning of values congruent with one’s previous social environment and the learning of values, or new ways of living, that successfully adapt one to the dissimilar nature of their new social environment. Resocialization may be involuntary- Goffman (as cited in Steckley, 2017, p. 118) described total institutions that impose complete control of inhabitant’s lives as primary sites for involuntary resocialization. In total institutions, unlearning is largely achieved through degradation ceremonies- while similar in structure, the destruction of individuality warranted by such rituals marks a great departure from rites of passage. Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket* illustrates how the humanity of young Marine recruits is marred by involuntary resocialization processes within the environment of bootcamp and, later on, the Vietnam war itself.

Full Metal Jacket opens with a montage of scenes depicting different young men getting their heads shaved. The expressions held by the men range from boredom to discomfort, but the majority of them appear as though they are in

deep and unsettling thought, judging by their despondent gaze. The mandatory head shaving exists a requirement for entry into military bootcamp but also as a minor degradation ceremony, seeing as the appearances of the recruits are rendered more homogenous, and any individual style exhibited in their hair is effectively discarded. The audience's first introduction to Gunnery Sergeant Hartman, whose command exerts ultimate control over the lives of the recruits, establishes the bootcamp as a total institution. As the recruits stand almost indistinguishable given their matching shaved heads, rigid posture and terror struck expressions, Hartman berates them savagely. Within his profanity-laced tirade, Hartman asserts that the recruits "...will speak only when spoken to", and that their first and last words will always be "Sir" (Kubrick & Kubrick, 1987), effectively regulating how the recruits are expected to conduct themselves while at bootcamp. Hartman is incredibly sensitive to any behaviour that falls outside of the "norm"- even an infringement as minor as placing a rifle on the wrong side of one's shoulder during a team exercise motivates him to humiliate the "offender" by having him trail behind a marching exercise with his pants around his ankles and thumb in his mouth. The "offender", Private Pyle, is singled out by Hartman for his subpar ability to conform to regulations and is hazed numerous times, with Hartman ostensibly believing that doing so will force his resocialization, or adoption of the behaviours and attitudes expected by the military.

As the first half of the film progresses, the status of military bootcamp as a total institution becomes ever clearer. The recruits have no control over what activities fill their days and are subject to stringent regulations concerning every aspect of their lives, no matter how miniscule- consider the mandatory "4 inch fold" on the ends of their bedsheets. Hartman even states that "...Marines are not allowed to die without permission." (Kubrick & Kubrick, 1987). These comments exemplify the attitude of complete submission that the recruits are expected to learn through their involuntary resocialization. Meanwhile, the effect of repeated hazing incidents, which can also be considered as degradation ceremonies (Steckley, 2017), quickly takes a serious toll on Private Pyle. In one instance, Private Pyle is found to have hidden a donut in his footlocker. It is implied that he is forbidden from consuming snack foods, and that taking food outside of the dining hall is a serious transgression. Private Pyle is humiliated by Hartman for this act in an extreme attempt by Hartman to induce the unlearning process in Private Pyle, as he is made aware that his previous behaviour of enjoying snack food is highly inappropriate in this new military social environment. As the first half of the film ends, Private Pyle finally begins to earn

Hartman's approval- but the psychological expense of Hartman's attack on his individuality is too great. The short streak of conformity exhibited by Private Pyle was only the side effect of his dehumanization, which climaxes with him turning a gun on Hartman and then himself on the last night of bootcamp.

The second half of the film follows Private Joker as he navigates war-ridden Vietnam as a combat correspondent. Free from the restrictive environment of bootcamp, Private Joker is exposed to the values of battle-weary infantrymen and forced to confront if he was truly "born to kill". The differences between the order of bootcamp and, as Private Joker puts it, being "in the shit" (Kubrick & Kubrick, 1987), are stark enough to induce resocialization. While Hartman drilled messages of glory, patriotism, and brotherhood into the recruits, Private Joker is now subject to the influence of experienced Marines with far less passionate attitudes towards the war. In one instance, Private Joker is amongst a group of Marines peering down at the body of a fallen Lieutenant when two Marines, one more experienced than the other, disagree over whether he had died "for freedom" or if the war was simply "a slaughter" (Kubrick & Kubrick, 1987). This unsympathetic, sometimes sarcastic attitude towards death presents as an attitude unique for survival in the social environment occupied by Marines on the front lines. Throughout the course of his resocialization, Private Joker is first acquainted with such attitudes, then, attempts to imitate them, and finally must begin to adopt them after making his first kill.

Private Joker's first exposure to the stresses of combat occurs mere minutes after he complains about his boredom and expresses a desire to be "in the shit", or on the front lines. After an offensive is launched upon their base, Private Joker says to his comrade that "I hope they're just fucking with us...I ain't ready for this shit!" (Kubrick & Kubrick, 1987), appearing more disturbed than the Marines surrounding him, perhaps indicating that his resocialization is still in its infancy. Not long after, Private Joker meets a door gunner during a helicopter ride and is quickly disturbed by the man's casual attitude towards death, particularly the fact that he felt no qualms about shooting at women and children. As he continues visiting various sites in search of a story, Private Joker is repeatedly exposed to men desensitized to the death surrounding them, including men who question the extent of combat he has been involved in, exemplifying that combat experience and a fearlessness surrounding death are both qualities that constitute the expectations of a war-zone's social environment. In an interview held by other correspondents, Private Joker seemingly imitates this

attitude in his statement that "...I wanted to be the first kid on my block with a confirmed kill." (Kubrick & Kubrick, 1987).

The true test of Private Joker's resocialization comes when a sniper unleashes a torrent of bullets on him and his comrades. While Private Joker is the first of the remaining Marines to locate the sniper, he is arrested by the experience of her shooting at him and drops his rifle. Even after preparing his handgun, Private Joker is unable to shoot her and watches as a comrade takes over and leaves her at near death. At this point, the sniper begins to pray and ask the Marines surrounding her to shoot her one last time. Private Joker, perhaps as a result of his relative inexperience, is the only Marine who expresses a desire to follow through with her plea and end her suffering, as another Marine argues that they should "leave her for the motherfuckin' rats" (Kubrick & Kubrick, 1987). Judging by the hardened expression adopted by Private Joker after he finally shoots her, and the casual positive reinforcement provided by his fellow Marines after the fact, it can be perceived that this "first kill" is a landmark event for his resocialization, particularly the adoption of a fearless attitude towards death and destruction. The film closes with the surviving Marines marching back to their camp amidst fire and rubble whilst cheerfully singing the Mickey Mouse Club Theme Song. Private Joker's participation in this act serves as a rite of passage of sorts, with him joining the ranks of Marines who have learned to disassociate from the harsh nature of their environment as a survival method.

From being drafted into serving in the military, to being bound by a severe penalty for desertion, the Marines depicted in Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* are a harrowing example of the process of involuntary resocialization. They undergo repeated courses of the process- first to conform to the requirements of the total institution that is a bootcamp, and second to engage in a culture embracing disassociation from the harsh realities of combat. The degradation ceremonies included serve to both homogenize the young men into equally fearless "killing machines", and humiliate those who fail to conform, even to the point of suicide. By and large, *Full Metal Jacket* presents a dramatic illustration of the potential consequences of involuntary resocialization and degradation ceremonies.

References

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- Steckley, J. (2017). *Elements of Sociology: A Critical Canadian Introduction*. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

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