

What Have We Become? Distortion of Self in Dysfunctional Institutions

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This reflective piece, a modified case-study analysis, owes as much to Sherwood Anderson, author of *Winesburg, Ohio*, as it does to George Mead and Erving Goffman. Anderson used the concept of the grotesque to describe those who fully embrace particular truths: "...the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth and tried to live by it, he became a grotesque..." (Anderson, 1960, p. 24). Framed sociologically, the concept is helpful in understanding my experience at several universities and one k-12 charter school in Miami-Dade County, Florida. To survive in any social or institutional environment social actors must adapt and adjust. In dysfunctional institutions, however, the adaptations and adjustments people make in order to survive often distort their self-presentation within those institutions. Individuals often become so distorted in their quest for personal survival within the dysfunctional institution that they become caricatures, what Anderson called "grotesques." For Anderson, embracing truths is an exercise of agency, but the truths eventually turn back on and distort those who have embraced them. Rather, I see people being distorted by dysfunctional institutional arrangements. Resisting the institutional and structural dysfunctions is adaptive, involves the exercise of human agency, and enables people to survive within a dysfunctional context. The cost is often high, however, in that many of the resisters--the survivors, those exercising their agency--are distorted; they become caricatures, or "grotesques."

Specifically, drawing on my experience at two medium-sized (25,000-30,000 students on campus) state universities in Michigan, two smaller state universities (5,000-8,000 students on campus) in Pennsylvania, and a k-12 charter school (about 350 total students) in Miami-Dade County, I briefly sketch out several composite caricatures or grotesques. Such includes Dr. Disengaged, sometimes referred to as Dr. Checked-out; Dr. Smiles, Dr. Complains Loudly, and Dr. Conspiracy, also known as Dr. Whispers or The Whisperer.

The concept of institutional survival, typically employed in macro-level analyses, may also refer to the agency-based strategies *individuals* use to survive *within* institutions. Survival strategies, however, often come at a high cost, distorting the self-presentation of those who employ them; they become "grotesques."