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Concentration Camp Rituals: Narratives of Former Bosnian Detainees

Goran Basic

Purpose:

This article analyzes the experiences retold by former concentration camp detainees who were placed in concentration camps at the beginning of the Bosnian war in the 1990s. The article aims to describe a set of recounted interaction rituals as well as to identify how these rituals are dramatized in interviews. The retold stories of humiliation and power in the camps indicate that there was little space for individuality and preservation of self. Nevertheless, the detainees seem to have been able to generate some room for resistance, and this seems to have granted them a sense of honor and self-esteem, not least after the war. Their narratives today represent a form of continued resistance.

Design/Methods/Approach:

The material for this study was collected through qualitative interviews held with nine former camp detainees and four close relatives. All of the interviewed now live in Sweden, Denmark, or Norway. Three were women and ten were men (all between ages 30 and 65 years), all of whom had survived the ethnic cleansing in northwestern Bosnia, carried out by Serbian soldiers and policemen. Eleven of them came from the Prijedor municipality and the remaining two from other municipalities in northwestern Bosnia. Among the interviewees, ten were Bosniacs and three Croats. Ten lived in Sweden, two in Norway, and one in Denmark. The interviews were performed from April through June of 2006. This article joins the narrative traditions within sociology that consider oral descriptions as both discursive and experience based (Potter 1996/2007). In addition to this general point, I found rituals to be particularly relevant components of the specific stories I examined.

Findings:

During the war in northwestern Bosnia, civilians were direct targets – and even participants – in acts of war. In this article, I have on the one hand described some of the social interaction rituals that occur during a war like this (in concentration camps); on the other, I have identified how these interactions are symbolically dramatized. Finally, I analyzed the morality emerging from these interactions.

The analyzed empirical examples revealed how the camp detainees' victim identity is created, recreated, and retained in contrast to 'the others' – the camp guards. The camp detainees' portrayal of their victim identity presents their humiliated self through dissociation from the camp guards. The detainees' new (altered) moral career is presented as a result of the imprisonment at the camp and the repetitive humiliation and power rituals. The importance of the camp guards was emphasized in these rituals, in which the detainees' new selves, characterized by moral dissolution and fatigue, emerged (Collins 2004; Goffman 1959/1990, 1961/1990, 1963/1990, 1967/1982).

In addition, detainees reproduced the image of morally wrong behavior that was created and recreated within their identity labor. The morality created in these conversations can be seen as a product of interaction rituals. It can be altered, created anew, reconstructed, and redefined. It seems that moral constructions materialize through reinforcements in the descriptions, such as recognizing and/or displaying emotions.

The interviewees' rejections of the guards' actions and their forced "camp detainee" status could be interpreted as an expression of de-ritualization, leading away from their own earlier experiences. The subsequently illustrated myriad of everyday interactions, which can be distinguished analytically in the interviewees' stories, expose rituals of humiliation, power, resistance, and status. Through these, we see the interviewees' loss of identity ("people just become like animals"), recognition of identity ("someone still watched over me or looked at me positively"), emotional involvement ("fucking unbelievable, Goran"), and different charged symbols ("a quarter of a loaf of bread", "one cigarette") (Knottnerus 2005, 1997; Luchterhand 1953; Thornburg et al. 2007).

The portrayed rituals of humiliation and power show that room for individuality in the camps was heavily restricted; still, the rituals of resistance and status, as well as adjusting to the living conditions in the camps, seem to have generated a certain room for increased individualization. The ability to resist and possess some degree of control seemed to give the detainees a sense of honor and self-esteem, not least after the war.

Keywords:

concentration camp, war, emotion; humiliated self; stigma; resistance; de-ritualization; power ritual

About the author(s):

Goran Basic is a lecturer in sociology at the Department of Sociology, Lund University. His research concerns fieldwork in Bosnia and Herzegovina, he has written articles on the post-war society and carried out an evaluation of a project in the juvenile care. Basic's dissertation "When collaboration becomes a struggle. A sociological analysis of a project in the Swedish juvenile care" is based on ethnographic material. Basic is currently analyzing the collaboration between border police and coastguard in the countries of Baltic region.

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