Mortification Processes

Understanding the Psychological and Social Processes Used to Break Down Personal Identity in High-Control Groups

Introduction

Mortification is a term used in sociology and psychology to describe processes through which a person's existing identity, sense of self, independence, and personal autonomy are systematically diminished or challenged.

The term is particularly relevant when examining high-control groups, coercive environments, abusive institutions, and settings in which individuals are subjected to sustained psychological pressure.

In these environments, mortification may involve stripping away a person's former identity, undermining their confidence, separating them from previous relationships, restricting personal choices, and encouraging dependence on an authority figure or group.

Mortification does not necessarily involve physical violence. It can occur through humiliation, intimidation, isolation, forced conformity, psychological manipulation, and repeated attacks on an individual's sense of worth.

Understanding these processes helps explain how people can become increasingly dependent on controlling groups and why leaving such environments can be psychologically difficult.

u.w.ozian

1. What Does Mortification Mean?

The word *mortification* has several meanings. In everyday language, it can refer to intense embarrassment, humiliation, or the suppression of personal desires.

In sociology, the concept is particularly associated with sociologist Erving Goffman and his 1961 work, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*.

Goffman used the term **mortification of the self** to describe processes through which institutional practices can undermine a person's previous identity.

He examined how institutions, particularly total institutions, can separate individuals from their former social roles and personal identities.

Examples of institutional environments included prisons, psychiatric hospitals, military institutions, and other settings where daily life is heavily controlled.

Although Goffman's original work focused on institutions, the concept can also help explain certain practices found in high-control groups.

Mortification Processes

2. How Does Mortification Work?

Mortification processes may occur gradually. Rather than one isolated incident, they can involve repeated experiences that progressively undermine an individual's independence and confidence.

Some common processes include:

Humiliation and Degradation

An individual may be repeatedly criticised, embarrassed, ridiculed, or made to feel inadequate.

This may happen privately or in front of other group members. Public humiliation can be particularly damaging because it combines emotional distress with social pressure.

Loss of Personal Identity

Individuals may be encouraged or required to abandon aspects of their previous identity.
This can include:

- Changing their name or appearance.
- Rejecting previous beliefs or values.
- Abandoning personal interests.
- Giving up familiar relationships.
- Adopting the group's language, rules, and identity.

u.w. ozian

Isolation from Outside Relationships

Individuals may be discouraged from maintaining relationships with family members, friends, or people outside the group.

Over time, their social world can become increasingly restricted, making the group their primary source of companionship, information, approval, and support.

Loss of Privacy

Personal information, thoughts, relationships, and experiences may become subject to monitoring or scrutiny.

In some environments, individuals may be expected to disclose private information to leaders or other members.

Such disclosures can subsequently be used to shame, intimidate, manipulate, or control them.

Restriction of Personal Choice

Individuals may lose control over everyday decisions, including:

- What they wear.
- What they eat.
- When they sleep.
- Who they associate with.

- What information they access.
- How they spend their time.
- Whether they can leave.

These restrictions can gradually undermine confidence in independent decision-making.

3. Mortification in High-Control Groups

High-control groups may use mortification-like practices to establish authority, encourage conformity, and increase members' dependence on the group.

Not every high-control group uses the same methods, and the presence of strict rules alone does not establish that mortification is occurring.

However, particular patterns may be concerning when they involve coercion, humiliation, intimidation, and the deliberate removal of personal autonomy.

Examples include:

Breaking Down Previous Beliefs
Members may be told that their previous beliefs, values, relationships, or experiences were wrong, dangerous, or worthless.

u.w. ozian

Creating a New Group Identity
The group may encourage members to view their previous identity as something that must be rejected or overcome.

The new identity may be closely connected to loyalty, obedience, and acceptance by the group.

Establishing Dependence on Authority
Leaders may position themselves as the only trustworthy source of guidance, information, protection, or personal understanding.

Using Shame as a Form of Control
Members may be made to feel guilty or defective for questioning instructions, expressing disagreement, or attempting to establish personal boundaries.

Punishing Independent Thinking
Questions, disagreement, and attempts to make independent decisions may be treated as disobedience or betrayal.

4. The Relationship Between Mortification and Coercive Control

Mortification and coercive control are related concepts, although they are not interchangeable.

Coercive control describes a pattern of behaviour intended to dominate another person through methods such as intimidation, isolation, surveillance, threats, and restrictions on freedom.

Mortification Processes

Mortification describes the processes through which an individual's identity and sense of self may be undermined.

In some abusive environments, both processes occur together.

For example, a controlling group may restrict an individual's relationships while simultaneously telling them that their previous identity was unacceptable.

The individual may gradually lose access to outside support while becoming increasingly dependent on the group for approval and a sense of belonging.

5. Psychological Effects of Mortification

Experiences involving prolonged humiliation, coercion, isolation, and loss of autonomy can have significant psychological consequences.

Possible effects include:

- Reduced self-esteem and self-confidence.
- Difficulty making independent decisions.
- Persistent feelings of shame or guilt.
- Anxiety and fear of punishment.
- Confusion about personal identity.
- Difficulty trusting other people.
- Emotional dependence on authority figures.
- Social withdrawal.
- Difficulty recognising personal boundaries.
- Fear of rejection or abandonment.

u.w.ozian

Some individuals may also experience trauma-related symptoms, depression, anxiety, or dissociative symptoms.

However, responses vary considerably. Not everyone exposed to these experiences develops the same psychological difficulties.

6. Mortification and Dissociative Experiences

Mortification may be relevant when examining the experiences of people who report dissociation following prolonged or repeated interpersonal trauma.

Dissociation is a broad term describing disruptions in the normal integration of consciousness, memory, identity, emotion, perception, and other psychological functions.

For some individuals, overwhelming or repeated experiences may be associated with dissociative symptoms.

It is important, however, not to assume that mortification automatically causes Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), or that everyone exposed to coercive environments will develop dissociation.

DID is a complex clinical diagnosis requiring appropriate assessment by a qualified mental health professional.

7. Why Can Mortification Make Leaving a Group Difficult?

Leaving a high-control environment can be complicated, particularly when an individual's identity, relationships, and independence have been undermined.

Several factors may contribute:

Loss of Social Support
Individuals may have lost contact with family members and friends outside the group.

Fear of Consequences
They may fear punishment, rejection, threats, or retaliation if they leave.

Loss of Identity
If the group has become central to their sense of self, leaving may create uncertainty about who they are outside that environment.

u.w. ozian

Conditioned Obedience
Repeated punishment for questioning authority may make independent decisions frightening.

Shame and Self-Blame
Individuals may believe they are responsible for their treatment or that they deserve the consequences of leaving.

Practical Dependence
Some people may depend on the group for accommodation, finances, employment, education, or access to their children.

These factors can make leaving a lengthy and difficult process. They should not be interpreted as evidence that an individual willingly accepted or approved of abusive treatment.

8. Recognising Mortification Processes

It is important to examine patterns of behaviour rather than isolated incidents.

Warning signs may include:

- Repeated humiliation or degradation.
- Pressure to abandon personal identity.

- Increasing restrictions on personal freedom.
- Separation from outside relationships.
- Punishment for questioning authority.
- Loss of privacy and personal boundaries.
- Forced disclosure of private information.
- Pressure to demonstrate loyalty through obedience.
- Persistent attacks on an individual's self-worth.
- Increasing dependence on the group or its leadership.

The central concern is whether these practices are being used to undermine an individual's ability to think independently, make personal choices, maintain relationships, and exercise autonomy.

9. Recovery Following Mortification

Recovery may involve rebuilding the aspects of identity and independence that were undermined during the controlling experience.

This process is individual and does not follow a fixed timetable.

Helpful areas of support may include:

Re-establishing Personal Identity
Individuals may benefit from exploring their interests, values, preferences, beliefs, and personal goals without pressure from others.

u.w. ozian

Restoring Personal Autonomy
Learning to make everyday decisions independently can help rebuild confidence.

Re-establishing Healthy Relationships
Developing supportive relationships outside the controlling environment can help reduce isolation.

Understanding Coercive Experiences
Learning about manipulation, coercive control, psychological conditioning, and institutional abuse may help individuals make sense of what happened.

Professional Support
Trauma-informed mental health professionals can provide support with emotional distress, trauma-related symptoms, dissociation, and difficulties with identity and relationships.

Recovery should respect the individual's pace, boundaries, and right to make their own decisions.

10. Important Distinctions

Mortification should not be confused with ordinary personal development, discipline, religious commitment, or voluntary lifestyle changes.

People may freely choose to change their beliefs, adopt new identities, participate in demanding activities, or follow strict personal practices.

The distinction becomes important when changes are imposed through coercion, intimidation, humiliation, threats, or the removal of meaningful choice.

Similarly, not every structured organisation or close-knit community uses mortification processes.

The context, methods, degree of control, and impact on individual autonomy must all be considered.

Conclusion

Mortification processes help explain how an individual's identity, confidence, independence, and sense of personal worth can be undermined within highly controlling environments.

In high-control groups, these processes may involve humiliation, isolation, forced conformity, loss of privacy, psychological intimidation, and the gradual restriction of personal autonomy.

Understanding mortification is important because the effects of controlling environments can extend beyond the period of involvement. Individuals may continue to experience difficulties with identity, trust, decision-making, relationships, and personal boundaries after leaving.

©U.W.Ozian

Recognising these processes can help individuals, families, therapists, and support professionals better understand the psychological impact of coercive environments.

The fundamental issue is the loss of personal autonomy: the ability to maintain one's identity, make independent decisions, establish boundaries, and exercise control over one's own life.

References and Further Reading

1. Goffman, E. (1961). *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*. Anchor Books.
2. Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Doubleday.
3. Lifton, R. J. (1961). *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of Brainwashing in China*. W. W. Norton & Company.
4. Schein, E. H. (1961). *Coercive Persuasion: A Socio-Psychological Analysis of the "Brainwashing" of American Civilian Prisoners by the Chinese Communists*. W. W. Norton & Company.
5. Herman, J. L. (1992). *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Basic Books.
6. Stark, E. (2007). *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*. Oxford University Press.

7. American Psychiatric Association. (2022). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed., text rev.; DSM-5-TR).

u.w. ozian