



Sexuality and the 'Relations of Ruling': Using Institutional Ethnography to Research Lesbian and Gay Foster Care and Adoption

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Summary

This article makes use of institutional ethnography to research foster care and adoption by lesbians and gay men, drawing on the work of the feminist sociologist Dorothy E. Smith in order to demonstrate the investigation of social work institutional categories and the 'relations of ruling'. Through an analysis of the ways in which 'gender' and the idea of the 'gender role model' is used within the assessment of gay and lesbian foster carers and adopters, the author shows how these categories are produced and used to police relationship forms and to identify 'deviant instances'.

Introduction:

This article asks how the practice of institutional ethnography may be used to make sense of social work responses to lesbian and gay foster care and adoption. It is based upon the work of the feminist sociologist Dorothy E. Smith, who has argued that institutional ethnography should examine the ways in which people's everyday practices, talk and texts are embedded in a prevailing set of social or 'ruling' relations (Smith 1987, 2005). Smith has defined these as "the complex of extra-local relations that provide in contemporary societies a specialization of organization, control, and initiative. They are those forms that we know as bureaucracy, administration, management, professional organization, and the media" (Smith 1990a, 6).

In order to understand the ruling relations of social work in the field of foster care and adoption, institutional ethnography requires us to examine the "ordinary daily scene," because this "has an implicit organization tying each particular local setting to a larger generalized complex of social relations" (Smith 1987, 156). Assessments are carried out in certain ways, with certain expectations, because they are a form of organizational order. Therefore, instead of simply asking whether social workers treat gay men and lesbians fairly, we should rather ask such questions as: how does social work make use of sexuality categories, and why are prospective carers assessed in particular ways? Researching the experiences of lesbian and gay carers will tell us something about the institutional discourses of social work and how these organize knowledge about sexuality. Part of this will entail examination of the ways in which accounts of life given by lesbian and gay applicants are transformed from the particular and complex into the general and objective. Yet we also need to ask how these processes are resisted, something that *some* versions of institutional ethnography tend to overlook.

Institutional ethnography requires us not to treat sexuality/gender as "already given" (Smith 1990a, 159). Unfortunately, much of social work theory/practice does just this, seeing 'lesbian' or 'gay', for example, as identity labels that merely describe preformed (or already given) types (Hicks 2008b). Within this frame, the task of social work appears, at best, to be a requirement not to discriminate against people on the basis of their gender or sexuality (see

Morrow & Messinger 2006; Thompson 2006). But this methodology does not ask how the categories of gender and sexuality are produced and put to use within what has been called social work 'discourse'. As Mark Philp has argued, "...beneath the apparent theoretical freedom in social work there is a form, an underlying constitution to everything that is said. This form creates both the possibility of a certain form of knowledge for social work and also limits social workers to it" (Philp 1979, 84). Particular *versions* of sexuality, or of sexual knowledge, are present and dominant.

Institutional ethnography does not ask about 'bad attitudes' towards lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people, but rather asks how versions of these categories of knowledge circulate within a given context. That is, rather than seeing the problem as merely 'homophobic individuals', institutional ethnography investigates the complex, frequently disputed, practices in which all of us – to some extent – participate and which are part of the organizational order of social work. Identifying practices as 'homophobic', much less getting some agreement and acting upon this, is a complicated, not inevitable, process. Gary Kinsman, for example, argues that ruling "social frames of consciousness regarding homosexuality as a 'social danger' or as 'sickness' are not simply backward ideas in some people's heads. Rather, these are actively organized within the worlds of official discourse and ruling relations" (Kinsman 1995, 80).

Here I intend to demonstrate how this form of analysis, or how this version of a sociology of knowledge, might be put into practice, drawing on Smith's work on textually-mediated social relations (Smith 1990a, 1990b, 2006b). This refers to the ways in which our understandings of contemporary society are "to a large extent mediated to us by texts of various kinds" (Smith 1990b, 61). Case files, minutes of meetings, court and assessment reports, and so on, act as versions of reality which embody, and yet also conceal, the workings of institutional power. Smith describes the social world as textually mediated, and notes the conversion of people into 'cases' as a classic social work move (Smith 1990a, 220).

The 'Standard Family':

Smith's essay, 'The Standard North American Family: SNAF as an ideological code' (Smith 1999), argued that 'SNAF' works as "a schema that replicates its organization in multiple and various sites" (1999, 159), and that it works to identify "deviant instances" (1999, 160). She said:

"SNAF-infected texts are all around us. They give discursive body and substance to a version of The Family that masks the actualities of people's lives and inserts an implicit evaluation into accounts of ways of living together in households or forming economically and emotionally supportive relationships that do not accord with SNAF" (Smith 1999, 171).

I am interested in the ways in which these evaluative processes are used when lesbians and gay men, who wish to adopt or foster children, apply to an agency and are formally assessed by social workers. Lesbian and gay foster care and adoption asks challenging questions about any 'standard family' model, since it does not accord with the adult male/female couple with children or, more strictly, the "capacity to generate [such] formulations" (Smith 1999, 246), in terms of sexuality, family 'type' or biologically-derived kin relations (Hicks, forthcoming). Social work is involved in assessing these questions and in representing them in textual form.

Smith has noted that, "in organizations concerned with processing people, characteristic forms of co-ordinating work processes focused on individuals are textual...Individuals are known as 'cases' under the interpretive aegis of their records. When decisions are to be made

their 'current status' is located in the textual traces of their past contained therein" (Smith 1990a, 220). In the case of foster care and adoption applicants in UK, social workers complete a formal report that takes a textual form. So this raises some interesting research questions: how do lesbian/gay lives become textual forms, and by what organizational categories are those lives disciplined?

I argue that one example of the ways in which gay/lesbian categories are disciplined is via the use of 'the gender role model' (Hicks 2000, 2006, 2008a). That is, a concern that lesbians and gay men will not be able to provide proper gender role models for children in their care is virtually ubiquitous within foster care and adoption work. 'Gender role model' is an institutional category for social work: it is raised by social workers, by managers or by foster care and adoption panel members almost without fail in relation to gay men and lesbians. It has been regularly talked about in my interviews with lesbian and gay carers, with social workers and managers, in training with social workers and students, in support groups for gay and lesbian carers, and is identified in further research (Clarke 2006; Clarke & Kitzinger 2005; Riggs 2007; Riggs & Augoustinos 2009).

But 'gender role' is a prime example of treating gender as already given. That is, gender is treated as a thing that must be passed on to children, rather than seeing it as an *activity of people* (Kessler & McKenna 1985). As Judith Butler has argued, "the child figures in [these debates] as a dense site for the transfer and reproduction of culture, where 'culture' carries with it implicit norms" (Butler 2004, 110). That is, the child figures as a dense site for the reproduction of (normative) gender. This is also part of the relations of ruling that govern our lives through gender (Hicks 2008a). A concept ['gender role'] replaces the *actual doing of gender* – gender is assumed to be a thing acquired. Something 'out there' ['gender'] is taken to correspond with the concept as though it is real, a process Smith refers to as the "blob-ontology" of much sociology (Smith 2005, 56). I aim to demonstrate these processes through analysis of the textual co-ordination of social reality, and will return to the gender role example.

How Texts Coordinate

Smith argued that texts work as "objectified forms of knowledge" (Smith 1990b, 61), employing facticity (the process by which knowledge claims appear as 'facts') because their claims appear "independent of their making" (Smith 1990b, 61). Thus a formal assessment report about potential foster or adoptive carers appears objective for a number of reasons. First, a standard or regulated format is often used. In the UK, for example, agencies may use the "F1-3" forms provided by the British Association for Adoption & Fostering (2000a, 2000b, 2005) and must refer to national standards (Department of Health 2001, 2002). Second, there is little or no sense of dialogue or disagreement between assessor and applicant. Third, the assessor's voice is largely absent, and, fourth, complex social ideas become categories. For example, complex racial histories and understandings are frequently reduced to rather fixed and simplistic identities, a process through which social ideas/practices about 'race' become groups and types (Wetherell & Potter 1992).

Institutional ethnography, however, encourages us to treat such texts as "virtual realities" (Smith 1990b, 62). Gerald de Montigny, for example says:

"Through textual work achieved as production of files, reports, running records, notes, and so forth social workers reproduce documentary exchanges, which as circulated, read,

interpreted, and acted on set into place a world of 'facts' that can be studied, recovered, recombined to tell professional and organizational 'stories'." (de Montigny 2007, 112)

Foster care and adoption assessment reports usually follow a standard format, with sections on family of origin, adult relationships, household, identity and so on. Identity, for example, is often treated and written up in quite essentialist ways. Gay and lesbian people are classically treated as having a fixed sexual identity once they have 'come out' and 'come to terms with' their sexuality. But this usually relies upon a version of sexuality that is fixed: there is little sense of the journey and continuing set of struggles that living a lesbian or gay life involves. Instead, there is an imagined point of 'coming out' at which one is assumed to become gay "all at once," as Ken Plummer suggested (Plummer 1975, 27).

But, as Plummer has carefully shown, becoming gay is a process in which meanings are attributed within a context of sexual norms and hierarchies. Becoming gay is a "process emerging through interactive encounters" (Plummer 1975, 94), although he does suggest that people may eventually become stabilized into a role. But even this does not suggest an embodied state. So, it is important to recognize that social work assessment is exactly an interactive encounter in which sexuality is defined. Of course, there are many constraints on individual social workers (resources, expected ways of working, standard formats, and so on), but there is a tendency to produce a limited version of sexuality categories in assessment reports. These are a *virtual reality* of a life since they will do for the panel and for the purposes of the assessment. This is because these texts embody particular institutional courses of action. The local and particular become generalized into objective forms (Campbell and Gregor 2004; Smith 2005).

Smith describes this as the process by which a life, or an account of a life, is subject to the "selection, assembly, and ordering of particulars" (Smith 1990b, 165). She demonstrates this through analysis of an example, a court psychological evaluation of a woman, Emma Merwin, who had applied for 'custody' of her son. Smith argues that the psychologist's report performs a three-step sequence: (1) an introductory pathologizing interpretation; (2) a description of the subject's behaviour; (3) a follow-up pathologizing interpretation that tells the reader to see the foregoing as symptomatic. For example:

Interpretive frame: This 34-year-old married woman, currently separated from her child, impressed as a woman with marked emotional difficulties clinically.

Description: She spoke in a very soft, controlled manner as if she were trying to hold onto emotional controls. She was not successful. Tears came very quickly. She presented as one whose thinking was loose, confused, and tangential. There was a loss of distance. When she looked at some of the cards, they took on an air of reality.

Follow-up interpretation: At the very least, her defenses displayed serious deterioration (Smith 2006b, 78).

We can think about this in terms of gender role models too: (1) any assessment of lesbian/gay applicants must address gender role models, as this is an expected organizational category. There is a concern that lesbians and gay men are gender dysfunctional. Gender role appears as an everyday 'fact', and is justified using ideas such as 'what all children need'; (2) a description of the applicants' responses to this question, of their lifestyle and support networks *in gendered terms*, is provided (for example, how many men or women they know

and come into contact with); (3) there is work to reassure panel, and other readers, of a normative gender order.

An example: assessing lesbian applicants and the question of 'gender role':

The data for this section come from ongoing research in which I have interviewed approximately 50 gay or lesbian foster carers or adopters (as well as about 30 social workers and managers) and have carried out documentary analysis in key cases. I focus on one case here (which may be a limitation for some readers) since institutional ethnography is concerned with detailed analysis of discourse and the production of ruling concepts. An adoption assessment report on a lesbian couple, Nita and Clare, had to address the point that they expressed a preference for a girl to be placed with them. These preferences, which themselves are about 'gender', are usual matching considerations, and so all applicants are asked whether they have a preference. Such preferences are "normally" accepted. But my argument is that, because Nita and Clare are lesbians, the report expressed concern about gender role:

The couple have made a first preference of a girl child as they feel they have something to offer, to enable a girl to grow up as a strong individual with self esteem and a good, clear sense of identity. They also feel that they know more as women what it is like to be a girl, having had some shared experience, whereas they wouldn't feel quite the same with a boy. They emphasized that they have not got a problem with boys and they know several boys and would consider one as a second placement if a sibling to the first child placed [adoption assessment report; from my research data].

Here we notice that the preference has to be justified, and that there is a rather defensive (because repeated) emphasis on 'not having a problem with boys'. On the question of gender roles, the report continues:

The couple have contact with several males and have commented that they are all positive, healthy figures who would make good role models for a child to look up to and they certainly would not include aggressive, macho figures to be amongst their friends. Nita and Clare are not anti-men, and their being lesbian is something that they feel inside is a natural state for them.

Here the report addresses a concern about male role models through reassurance ("several males") and also positions men as to be 'looked up to'. 'Men' are neatly divided into discrete 'good man/bad man' types ("positive, healthy" versus "aggressive, macho"), which indicates an unacknowledged problem with role model theory: in these terms, what "type" of man exactly provides a 'positive role model'? The figure of the 'man-hating lesbian' is invoked and addressed (they are "not anti-men"), and, finally, the notion of lesbianism drawn upon here is a natural/biological one ("they feel inside is a natural state"). This diffuses the idea that lesbianism might be seen as a political or social choice and challenge to heteronormativity. There cannot be too much questioning of traditional 'gender'. Or rather, Barbara, the social worker, knows that traditional 'gender' can, and should, be questioned. But she is also aware that the adoption panel will ask her about balanced gender role models, and in interview, Barbara told me that she had to represent the couple as "not too feminist." I make this point to emphasize that institutional ethnography is not about blaming individuals (here, a social worker), but rather is concerned with uncovering expected institutional categories ('gender role') that those individuals have to bring into play.

In my interviews with Nita and Clare, we talked about the assessment of 'gender':

Steve: OK, how did [Barbara] 'do' gender?

Clare: She asked us whether...well, there's something on the form where it asks about, "are jobs allocated or do you have roles that are...?" So we said how we didn't have male and female roles and how we thought it really important for children not to, and all that sort of stuff...and the other thing that came up with gender was that we wanted girls.

Nita: Yes we talked quite a lot about that really, because she wanted us not to say that...

Steve: What did you have to say in the end?

Nita: Well we said that we'd want to have a girl placed with us initially, but if that girl's birth mother then had a boy and we were asked if we would take the next sibling, that we would consider him...and that's all we said really!

Steve: But in a sense it was something that you had to say on the form as well as for panel's benefit...

Nita: Yes...

Clare: ...and at the beginning of the assessment, Barbara said there was no problem, she said, "Oh yes, it's really common for people to say they only want boys or they only want girls...No problem"-sort of thing, but it wasn't until...Well, I got the impression that it was when she went back and she had team meetings and people played devil's advocate with the panel...and she then became sort of more and more anxious about it and pushed it, and certainly the second social worker pushed it as well, so that was when we...

Nita: ...caved in!

This section of dialogue represents everyday analysis of 'gender' in action. That is, Nita and Clare themselves are practical analysts of gender, as indeed was Barbara, their social worker. It is important, here, to note that a question, initially added to standard assessment forms (British Agencies for Adoption & Fostering 1991) in order to *avoid* the reinforcement of rigid gender roles amongst children, is transformed into a concern about gender dysfunction amongst lesbians and gay men. Clare recognizes this as a 'game', having to meet required expectations, when she says, "all that sort of stuff." Barbara knows that, although a preference for a girl would normally be fine, here it becomes a problem *because Nita and Clare are lesbians*. My suggestion that the answer given in the report is for "the form as well as for panel's benefit" also shows that all four of us – Nita, Clare, Barbara and me – recognize this as part of an institutional order. That is, whatever we think about 'gender role models', this question must be addressed and concerns reassured. Barbara becomes more anxious about the need to address this as her colleagues remind her of this, and Nita's comment about 'caving in' also acknowledges that the gender order is part of institutional processes.

I also asked them about the question of male role models in relation to referees and support networks:

Steve: So did she ask you to find a more 'conventional' referee?

Nita: Well she said, "Can you come up with a heterosexual couple with a child?" That's what she wanted...

Clare: And we went, "Yes, yes, yes..." and we put the phone down and went, "Oh my God, what are we going to do?..." We were trawling through our minds...because that's what she used to say to us, she would say, "Can you think about male role models?" And we would go, "Yes, yes," and then we'd go, "Oh my God"... But the thing is that you can make anything up for those forms, that's what is the joke about them...As long as you've got your story right, you know, I could have had seven best friends who were all male and came here every week to play pontoon or something!...

Here, once more, the question about gender role models is addressed, and specifically the need for male role models. This is also clearly linked to a concern about the need to model heterosexuality, too, as Barbara has asked for an extra set of referees, "a heterosexual couple with a child." As Judith Butler has noted, the "institution of a compulsory and naturalized heterosexuality requires and regulates gender as a binary relation in which the masculine term is differentiated from a feminine term, and this differentiation is accomplished through the practices of heterosexual desire" (Butler 1990, 23). Where a 'male role model' appears absent, then this must be provided for through heterosexual contacts. Gender roles are not just about gender, they are also about maintaining normative sexualities.

Clare's comments are also very interesting because they acknowledge the 'virtual reality' of the assessment report as text: "you can make anything up for those forms." Clare and Nita address the gender concern, they duly provided the extra referees, but they also undercut this with humour. They understand that gender is display (Goffman 1979), that it is "performative - ...always a doing" (Butler 1990, 25). This is a crucial point because, when analyzing institutional discourse, it is vital to show how this is actively resisted. The question about male/gender role models is understood and challenged by Nita and Clare.

Some social workers also challenged this too. And this is another important point for institutional analysis: we must avoid presenting *all* institutional members (here, social workers) as though they are 'dupes' of dominant categories. In her interview with me, Barbara undercut and challenged expected gender norms, and drew on her own experiences, as a black woman and as a feminist, to question institutional order. Yet at the same time, she was compelled to address it. In her terms, she wanted to cover all possible concerns of the adoption panel members, otherwise she felt that Nita and Clare might be rejected. Other social workers, who were supportive of gay and lesbian applicants, raised this too:

It's the whole thing about role models which people are obsessed with; that, if you are a lesbian couple, there's no male role model, or with gay men that there's no female or indeed male role model, and I don't agree and I don't really understand it because it doesn't take much brain to see through it. [Annie, a social worker].

And:

June: If I was assessing a lesbian couple, would I be worried that they were going to turn their girls into a man-hating little person, is that the kind of thing you're asking?

Steve: Yes, that's certainly something lesbians get asked...

June: Oh yes, "Do you like men? Can you prove it? Will this child grow up to be a man-hating girl?" ...No, I wouldn't take that approach I don't think. [June, a social worker].

Annie and June are both careful analysts of gender, yet they, and other social workers, told me that they had to address gender roles in their reports, and were questioned about this at panels. Any questioning of traditional gender will be transformed into a socio-psychological problem.

In one example, I spoke to an adoption social worker, Cathy, who said:

"... I'd ask gay men how they would see a boy...I mean presumably it would be a boy that you would place with them, I would imagine, so how would they see that relationship developing as they got older...would they want them to be either lesbian or gay or whatever...?"

Cathy suggested that all children 'needed' a mother and father, so any questioning of this idea leads to suggestions of gender deviance: in her terms, gay men should only care for boys but they might "want" a boy to become gay or even lesbian. So I would argue that, for the purposes of regulating gender and sexuality, a foster care or adoption application by lesbians or gay men is transformed into an objective statement of threat to children's needs. Cathy assigned 'family' to what were, for her, 'normal' heterosexual relations, a process by which some relationships are designated culturally usual and preferable (Gubrium & Holstein 1990), and others made out as "deviant instances" (Smith 1999, 160).

Policing Sexuality and the Question of Textually-Mediated Social Relations:

A more usual analysis of these problems within social work practice would be to label them as examples of 'homophobia', that is, where they are addressed at all. I am sure that, at times, I have done this myself. However, institutional ethnographers have found the concept of homophobia to be rather limiting as a form of analysis. This is spelt out most clearly in the work of George W. Smith (1988, 1990, 1998). His discussion of a police raid on a gay steambath/sauna introduces his concept of the "ontological shift" (Smith 1988, 166), which he described in a later essay as "a change from a generalized world of conceptual and theoretical explanations to the concrete, sensuous world of people's actual practices and activities" (1990, 633).

For Smith, simply labelling some people, or attitudes or actions as homophobic does not ask about concrete activities of people that result in the establishment of particular sexual/social relations. Via analysis of evidence used in the police raid, for example, Smith shows the transformation of "a scene of sexual pleasure into the site of a crime" (Smith 1988, 171). That is, a documentary/ objective form of knowing the social is produced, but one in which gay sex is criminalized and regulated.

Smith's careful analysis of how a text, which represents ruling relations, is produced as 'objective' was carried out in order to demonstrate the problems with 'homophobia'. He described:

"...the attribution of agency to concepts such as "homophobia" or organizational glosses such as "red tape." These became the "causes" of action or inaction by a régime. Instead of events being actively produced by people in concrete situations, they are said to be "caused" by ideas such as "[homo]-phobia" (Smith 1990, 634).

For Smith, this is a problem as it may attribute anti-gay action to individual 'bad attitudes', or assign agency to a concept ('homophobia did it or caused it'). But this does not offer "much help in effectively challenging or changing the workings of a *régime*" (Smith 1990, 634). Smith's ontological shift, then, asks institutional ethnographers to examine the everyday workings of people's activities and practices, so that we may understand discourse, or "forms of textually mediated social organization, organized extra-locally in texts (e.g. in the media), that shape activities, events, and talk in local settings" (Smith 1998, 313).

For some, Smith's work is controversial because it seems to be a denial of 'homophobia'. But Dorothy Smith has noted, "the concept of homophobia forestalled investigation of how the regime worked to enable such actions [as the bathhouse raids]... [George Smith] did not deny, of course, that there was homophobia, but held rather that it was a dead end politically, to use the term as an explanation for all the oppressions that gays experienced" (Smith 2006a, 21-3).

To understand the relations of ruling that constrain sexual knowledge within social work, our focus needs to be on people's situated practices. That is, how are ideas about the sexual formed and put to use within everyday social work settings? For institutional ethnography, this is preferable to an approach that merely sees 'homophobic' and 'non-homophobic' individuals. George Smith's analysis suggests that to put actions down to individual attitudes or even personalities allows for an easy 'bad apple'-type explanation. Instead, we need to ask how social practices organize heteronormativity.

This is a challenge for much research and education within social work because this often asks us to teach students and practitioners to examine *their* homophobic attitudes, as though *we* are immune from all this; and as though homophobia is an aberrant and extraordinary event, rather than a mundane activity or process. As Dharman Jeyasingham notes, homophobic "aesthetics and heteronormativity work to police social relations and experiences of intimacy for most of us, not just members of sexual minorities" (Jeyasingham 2008, 149). One way that we might ask how heteronormativity operates is through the examination of 'ordinary' social work concepts, such as 'gender role model', to show how these are used to produce and police sexuality/gender relations within mundane social work scenes.

Social Work as an Institutional Discourse:

The social work techniques involved in assessing lesbian and gay foster care and adoption applicants – interviews, notes, filling in forms, observation, gathering evidence, checking accounts, drawing diagrams, training courses etc. – are "inscriptive practices," but traces of "how it came about that may have been in textual form, such as previous drafts, corrections, alternative wordings, and so forth, which provide for scholars of literature an inexhaustible mine of indeterminacies – all are obliterated" (Smith 1990b, 74). This means that the typical form of the applicant assessment report is "taken for granted" (Smith 1990b, 93). Or, the "issue of whether such statements are accurate accounts of what was going on *never even arises*" (Smith 2006b, 77). This is because the final report must be recognizable to the foster care or adoption panel – in expected form – as "a proper instance or expression of its regulatory categories and concepts" (Smith 2006b, 85).

So gender role models must be duly addressed, even where social workers told me that they were opposed to this idea. It is an institutional category within the gendered 'relations of ruling' of social work:

“The set of categories, the development of methods of filling categories and of articulating descriptive categories to a lived actuality to constitute ‘what actually happened’ as an organizational practice, arise in and as a part of an operation of the state and professional extensions of state interest. They are integral to the organization of the state and to other apparatuses and relations of ruling” (Smith 1990b, 144).

Liza McCoy has argued that, what institutional ethnographers “refer to as an institutional discourse is, therefore, any widely shared professional, managerial, scientific, or authoritative way of knowing (measuring, naming, describing) states of affairs that render them actionable within institutional relations of purpose and accountability” (McCoy 2006, 118). She reminds us that the research focus, here, should be on that institutional discourse, and not just on what respondents tell us. For me, this allows us to acknowledge resistance to an institutional order, a key point since social work is not monolithic – there are resistances to the institutional order from within, and it consists of various people’s co-ordinated practices.

I have found institutional ethnography very productive for my research because, unlike much social work research and theory, it doesn’t treat accounts of practice as ‘really real’ and it doesn’t treat social work categories as merely referential. In that sense, this article is an argument for a sociological and methodological approach. Institutional ethnography helps us see how social workers “inscribe everyday or mundane occasions as proper instances into organizational categories” (de Montigny 1995, 28). I have only had space to consider aspects of two of these categories in any detail here, but what is clear to me is that ‘gender/sexuality’ are not descriptive terms in social work, they are produced and they are used. In that sense, they are disciplinary/intimate events (Povinelli 2006), and they have to do with the establishment of “deviant instances,” as Smith has argued (1999, 160).

For lesbians and gay men, we have seen social work requiring a responsibility to reproduce adequate gender, and the theoretical location of sexuality as an interior, even bodily, state. My view is that institutional ethnography can help us – social workers, lesbians, gay men, researchers, all of us within the field of foster care and adoption – to challenge limiting views on what we think of as ‘gender/sexuality’ in the first place. Instead, we might ask how these categories are achieved and put to use. In the fields of foster care and adoption, where the topic of gay and lesbian care remains a controversial one, then this might also help us to begin to question some of the limiting views about ‘normal/deviant’ instances that circulate within social welfare practices.

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