The Social Organization of the Treatment of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth in Group Homes and Youth Shelters

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Critical analysis of social work and the welfare state has provoked intense debate about their role in countering or producing social inequalities. A substantial body of literature has developed on the relationship between social services and, for example, poverty, class, women's inequality, and racism.[2] This paper undertakes an exploration of how youth services are implicated in the social organization of sexuality and, in particular, the dominance of heterosexuality. While this paper draws from and speaks to the burgeoning literature on sexuality and compulsory heterosexuality,[3] the preponderance of theoretical debates over empirical research has encouraged me to investigate how heterosexual dominance is accomplished in particular locations.[4]

In this paper I argue that professional discourses[5] of homosexuality and lesbianism as "pathological" or "deviant" have reinforced grave inequities in the treatment of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth by group homes and youth shelters. As evidence I draw on interviews with lesbian, gay and bisexual youth, showing that while they were residents they were denied equal services, had to contend with "institutional silence" concerning lesbian and gay male sexuality, were at serious risk of verbal and physical abuse, were pathologized for their sexual orientation, and were isolated and forced to remain closeted (to hide their sexuality). A substantial portion of the paper will be devoted to exploring how some of their most powerful experiences were marked by gender differences, suggesting important links between gender inequality and sexual regulation.[6] I will argue that agency responses to lesbian, gay and bisexual youth were also socially organized by institutional processes concerning the practice of social work and child welfare and by unequal race relations. These dominant discourses were contested by a few feminist residences and by a small number of youth who were openly lesbian, gay or bisexual while they were living in residences. The analysis will be refined and expanded through later stages of the research study in which residential workers and managers will be interviewed.

Throughout the paper I will frequently use the term "residence" to encompass a number of different settings: first, group homes for youth over and under 16 years of age, primarily those housing young people under the care of child welfare agencies (the study did not consider other types of group homes, such as those intended for young offenders or youth with disabilities); second, specialized group homes for youth over and under 16, that are often called "residential treatment centres" because of their greater emphasis on psychological counselling; third, shelters and hostels for homeless and street youth over 16.

Although I do not explore class relations in this paper, it is important to note that class plays a role in many of these young people's experiences in residences. Shelters and hostels are intended for people without housing or the financial means to obtain it. Concerning the relation between child welfare agencies and class, let us look at the example of the Children's Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto (CASMT). In 1991, the CASMT was the "substitute parent" for 2,676 children, and worked with 16,813 other children in their own homes. Half of these families lived on social assistance and 40% resided in assisted housing.[7] Several of the young people I interviewed were from poor and working-class backgrounds; others had been removed from middle- or upper-income families where they were being abused, or had been forced to flee families of various classes because their parents rejected their sexual orientation.

This research originated out of concerns among Toronto lesbian and gay activists about the situation of young people in group homes and shelters, and in my desire to contribute to community efforts to effect social change. In 1991, rumours that lesbian, gay and bisexual youth were poorly treated in group homes and youth shelters came to the attention of the Sexual Orientation and Youth Program at Central Toronto Youth Services. A subsequent literature search revealed a number of brief articles by U.S. youth workers reporting on problems they witnessed in their work with gay and lesbian youth. Gay and lesbian clients of the U.S. child welfare system were reportedly considered to be "hard to place," and sometimes faced long delays in finding spaces in group homes,[8] partly because some homes refused to accept gay and lesbian youth as residents.[9] One author found a "lack of understanding, an unwillingness to serve and non-acceptance by staff" within youth agencies.[10] Others reported an inability to address the concerns of lesbian and gay youth or to provide gay-affirmative support or counselling.[11] There were also reports of isolation of gay and lesbian residents, and harassment, intimidation and abuse by other residents and staff,[12] as well as verbal abuse or name-calling by residents with no reproach by staff, and physical and sexual abuse "with little recourse."[13] One social worker in the U.S. argued that many "placement failures" in foster homes,

group homes and other residences were gay and lesbian clients.[14] In sum, lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are not only inadequately served, but they are at risk when staying in residences.

The above observations from U.S. sources find parallels in the even scarcer Canadian documentation of service provision to lesbian and gay youth. An anonymous gay former client of the child welfare system in the Maritimes was afraid to tell his worker that he was gay in case he would lose his financial support.[15] A Winnipeg study found that gay and lesbian youth felt they were "treated differently" by professionals because of their sexual orientation, but did not investigate this further. Social service workers surveyed in the same study reported that there was prejudice among their colleagues toward homosexuality and that there was a lack of services for lesbian and gay youth.[16] This is the sum total of Canadian documentation on the subject.[17]

Absent from the literature is a systematic investigation of the problems experienced by lesbian, gay and bisexual youth in shelters, group homes, treatment homes and other residences. The Sexual Orientation and Youth Program therefore decided to undertake a research study that would document the situation by interviewing youth, front-line staff and management. In 1991 I was involved with the Sexual Orientation and Youth Program on a graduate social work placement, and I was searching for a research project that would be useful to gay and lesbian communities. I accepted an invitation to participate in the project by taking responsibility for the first stage of the research: interviewing gay, lesbian and bisexual youth residents. This paper is based upon the interviews I conducted.

The research was conducted within the framework of institutional ethnography, a research strategy developed by Dorothy Smith to reveal the social processes and practices that organize people's everyday experience.[18] "Institutional" here refers to law, health care, education and other sectors of the "ruling apparatus" or "relations of ruling," that is, the organized practices of government, business, the professions and other forms of administrative organization and regulation.[19] My goal was the development of research problematics, from the standpoint of lesbian, gay and bisexual residents, for the later phases of the investigation. The overall findings will guide the advocacy and community work of the Sexual Orientation and Youth Program. As Dorothy Smith puts it: "We want to be able to say, 'Look this is how it works; this is what happens' . . . We want to be able to *know* because we also want to be able to act and in acting to rely on a knowledge beyond what is available to us directly."[20]

Through contacts with youth services and lesbian and gay youth organizations, 17 gay, bisexual and lesbian youth who are currently or were recently in residences came forward to be interviewed. Of these, 10 were

men and 7 were women, 12 were European-Canadians, one was a youth of colour and four were Aboriginal youth.[21] Most of the young people I talked to were between the ages of 18 and 20 and had spent many years as consumers of child welfare and youth agencies (in Ontario and other provinces). They do not represent a "sample" of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth since I was not trying to generalize from a small number to a larger population. To do so would mean studying lesbian and gay youth themselves, thereby taking up the standpoint of management. Since I was investigating the treatment of lesbian and gay youth, as an entry point into the operations of residences, I aimed to take up their standpoint.

Before beginning the interviews, I discussed the purpose of the research, clarifying that the "subjects" of the study were the residences and not the young people themselves, and that their knowledge and experiences would help us understand how group homes and shelters work. I began the interviews with an open-ended question and attempted to encourage a dialogue between myself and the narrators, asking follow-up questions as they emerged from the flow of the conversation. I addressed them as informants sharing their members' knowledge of the everyday world of residences, with my being a lesbian extending my member's knowledge of the everyday world of lesbian and gay people.[22] The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed.

Institutional silence

The everyday world of lesbian, gay and bisexual residents of group homes and shelters was organized by the lack of official recognition of homosexuality. Young people reported that staff assumed that all the residents were heterosexual, and sexual orientation or lesbian and gay issues were absent from the sanctioned discourse of intake interviews, counselling sessions, house meetings, social activities, house reading material, flyers for community events and so on. The existence of homosexuality or bisexuality among the residents and within society was thus denied and rendered invisible and insignificant:

> Young woman: They never said anything. They never said anything. They, everyone assumed that everyone was straight. It wasn't talked about. It wasn't acknowledged.[23]
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> Young woman: They [the residence] had this thing [notice], you have these rights, children's rights, your rights as being in a group home. And, um, if something goes on, who you go to, blah, blah, blah. They had nothing about homosexuality.
>
> Young man: I felt like they expect everyone to be straight 'cause you walk in and they asked me every question in the book except that. I almost expected to be asked that when I went there, you know. And

they would have meetings every day about job findings and stuff. But there was never a meeting about anything like that.

Young woman: I think being lesbian and being two-spirited, I don't think that people want to acknowledge that it's in group homes.[24]

Young woman: I think part of why they never addressed it [was] 'cause I really think they were trying to persuade me in the other direction.

The lack of institutional recognition of homosexuality was also detected by the residents in the absence of openly gay and lesbian staff. Gay and lesbian staff members pretended that they were heterosexual, colluding in the official denial of the existence of homosexuality and the discourse of homosexuality as illicit:

Young woman: There was lesbian workers there. They didn't come out and say they were lesbians. They never said anything.

Young man: I thought there was this one [gay staff]. I always thought he was a nice man, and after [a dispute about him being openly gay while a resident] he just stayed right out of it . . . And I saw him at a bar a year later, and he came up and was talking to me and I thought, "I don't want you talking to me. Get away from me." 'Cause I needed his help.

The institutional invisibility of homosexuality in group homes and youth shelters was embedded in silences about sex and sexuality in general, and the regulation of female sexuality:

Interviewer: Did staff ever talk about anything to do with sex?

Young woman: No, no, not at all, no, nothing. I couldn't tell you what the reasons are, um, it could be because it's like, sort of, I don't think the staff could deal with it, to be honest with you, I don't think they could handle it.

Young woman: They didn't talk about anything to do with sex. And instead of talking there was gossiping about other residents, saying so-and-so is a hooker, so-and-so works as an exotic dancer in a strip bar, stuff like that.

Institutional tolerance of anti-gay abuse

When they entered group homes and youth shelters, young gay and bisexual men were immersed in a profoundly hostile and dangerous world. Fear was the dominant emotion in their stories of everyday life, fear that was organized by the failure of residences to take responsibility for providing gay youth with protection from verbal and physical abuse. The young men described a consistent pattern of pervasive and violent homophobic everyday language among residents which took a number of forms, including name-calling, gay-baiting and bragging about gay-bashings. This homophobic

talk organized the intimidation of closeted gay youth and other youth whose behaviour or dress might not conform with dominant forms of masculinity:

> Young man: [There was] a lot of violence from them, you know, talking about violence. I'm always hearing about how they went to [a park] and, you know, "Beat up a couple of fags", so they say.
>
> Young man: You'd hear all the time the boys talk, "Fucking faggot." "They think they run the world, fucking fags." Stuff like that. Half the time it wouldn't even make sense what they said, it would be so stupid. But I mean, they said it, so for my own protection I thought it was better to keep quiet about it. And I did.

A recurring theme in the young men's narratives was that of "having to be careful" because of the danger of anti-gay violence. For reasons of safety, most gay male residents were forced to adopt the strategy of concealing their sexual orientation and passing for heterosexual:

> Young man: All those places you have to be so careful . . . All they do is sit and put down those "fucking faggots" or all those bashings, and it's like, laugh, laugh, laugh.
>
> Young man: I've never actually seen somebody get beat up because they're gay or bisexual or even suspected of it. I've never seen it. All I've heard is a lot of talk about it. And that's enough for me to not say anything.

Passing for straight required considerable effort, self-regulation and denial of self. Young gay men had to police what they talked about, how they behaved, and especially, they had to ensure that not a single glance or gesture would betray them as desiring other males:

> Interviewer: Did you feel like you had to pretend to be straight?
>
> Young man: Yeah, oh yeah. Yeah, for my own protection.
>
> Interviewer: What were you afraid would happen if you didn't?
>
> Young man: I was afraid I would get beat up.
>
> Young man: I may look at guys, but I have to be careful. I have to catch myself all the time.

Sometimes 'passing' involved participating in anti-gay talk and other expressions of dominant masculinity; some even joined in gay-bashing attacks:

> Interviewer: How would you act straight?
>
> Young man: Just, you know, act really tough and just don't talk to nobody and if somebody talks to you say, "What the fuck do you want?"
>
> Young man: I would go along if they talked about girls. I would talk about girls I'd gone out with before and just make it sound like the present . . . [and] I've always liked sports, so I know my sports really

well. That always goes over really well.

Young man: I don't like this, but sometimes I have to go along with them, you know, getting into it, playing with what they're saying . . . to totally throw them off if they got the impression that I was gay or bisexual.

Young man: As soon as I went in there I had to be "mister straight."

Interviewer: You had to act straight?

Young man: Yeah, totally act straight, 'cause a lot of the guys in there late at night would go out around like a place like Church and Wellesley[25] . . . they would go out and, like, "fag bash" and all that and, like talk about it a lot. And I, of course, was, like, "Oh, yeah." Of course I'd join, so, so they didn't know about me.

The fears of residents who attempted to pass were well founded, for they witnessed the experiences of those whose sexual orientation was known. Anti-gay verbal abuse was particularly targeted at those young men whose efforts to pass as heterosexual were not successful, or who had decided to be open about their sexuality. As well, physical harassment ranging from minimal yet intimidating body contact to potentially life-threatening violence took place within group homes and shelters:

Interviewer: What kinds of things would they call you?

Young man: Queer, fag, uh, homo, you know. Just the normal everyday gay insults.

Young man: They would call me names and bug me about it and stuff like that. There was no physical stuff really. I never got hit. But, you know how you walk by someone, and they kind of nudge you or something like that. That was the worst it got, physically. Or I would walk by and they would be, like, super close and they just kind of shove me a little bit, but that was it.

Young man: I was pretty open towards the end of living in the group home. Everybody knew that I was gay . . . most of the people that were there were pretty positive about it . . . [Some other residents] when they found out they got very violent with me . . . There was one day where I caught this guy going through my stuff. And I told him that I didn't like it. He threatened to kill me and we started fighting, he tried to push me over the bannister and the staff basically came and rescued me . . . Another guy wouldn't let me out of my room. I was locked in my room for about 20 minutes or so.

Staff practices were deeply implicated in anti-gay violence in residences. For example, in the case of the last excerpt above, the staff responded promptly once the violence occurred, although previously they had denied the potential for risk to the physical safety of the gay resident, as the following quote from him indicates:

> Young man: Part of the reason for those two guys coming after me was because I was roommates with them and I couldn't handle them. It was very uncomfortable. I couldn't sleep at nights, wondering whether or not this person was going to hurt me while I was sleeping or go through my things and steal my stuff. I was a basket case.
>
> Interviewer: Did you ever tell the staff that you were afraid of these guys?
>
> Young man: Yeah. It was, like, "Well, there's nothing we can do about it right now . . . " Until the day they had to get the police in.

Even when this gay resident explicitly indicated what his needs were concerning the primary issue of safety, the residence was unable to provide the required services. This episode revealed the dominance of discourses of homosexuality as deviant, insignificant and undeserving of equal services, and the unequal social relations between clients and staff within residences.

Institutional tolerance of anti-gay abuse was also indicated on the occasions when staff members themselves instigated anti-gay talk, as the following excerpt shows:

> Young man: It got to be more the kids, but for me it was the staff who started it. Like you could hear them snickering and making their little comments . . . Like, if we'd be going on a outing in the car and the staff, like, knew I was bisexual, we'd be driving down the street and one staff, I remember him, he pointed at this guy and said, "That guy looks like a faggot." And then he turned to me and said, "Do you know him?" Stuff like that.

More frequently, staff would confirm official tolerance towards the verbal abuse of gay residents by abdicating responsibility for ending this behaviour, or by imposing ineffectual discipline:

> Young man: I think there was one [staff] woman who said something once. And I think she said "We won't have that kind of talk," something along those lines. "You don't say things like that, that's not nice." . . . Otherwise the staff didn't hear or they didn't want to hear 'cause that was the only one time I ever heard staff say anything.

Gay youth were not seen as a legitimate group with a right to equal services and protection from abuse. This pattern was further demonstrated in the example below, when staff refused to provide protection to an Aboriginal youth who was not attempting to 'pass' but rather was wearing 'drag' (women's clothes). The potential for anti-gay violence was used as an excuse for denying him a bed in their shelter:

> Young man: This one hostel said, "It's best that we don't let you in here for your own good. It's best to just go elsewhere. We don't want any trouble here. We don't want you to get hurt either." I said, "You

can't do that, you know. I need a place to stay tonight. So if something happens, it's my fault. I can take care of myself. Just give me a bed." They just can't do that.

Interviewer: They wouldn't let you in?

Young man: No.

Gay and bisexual men experienced social isolation in residences, which took different forms, depending upon whether or not they were open about their sexuality. Openly gay youth suffered rejection by heterosexual residents. Closeted youth distanced themselves from other people for fear that their sexual orientation would be discovered:

Interviewer: So in the group homes, how would it be with roommates?

Young man: I just didn't talk to them. I would just go in and lie down and read or whatever and go to sleep and they would whisper about me sometimes.

Young man: When you're at [a hostel] or something, you're talking and just kind of, you always got that barrier because you're gay. You don't want anybody to know because you don't want anybody pointing their finger at you.

As is apparent in their accounts, gay and bisexual male youths' experiences in residences caused considerable emotional pain and compounded difficulties in their lives as a result of, for example, homelessness or abuse within their families. Some responded by running away or by trying to kill themselves:

Young man: I went there for help and it just kind of ended up messing things up even more because I was worried about all this stuff. I didn't have time, I dunno, I got too worried about standing up for myself, I didn't have time to straighten other things up.

Young man: I was really really upset so I took like 40 aspirins because I thought, "Well, maybe I'll kill myself." I took about 40 aspirins and I got really scared and I called my friend because I didn't really want to do it. At first it was like I wanted to do it. Then I called my friend and said like, "Oh, my god." So he came over and got me and I got my stomach pumped. They never found out about that. But it was just, like I started drinking and stuff, because I just felt like total dirt.

Young man: I actually ran away from a couple of group homes because I didn't like it.

Staff practices were also organized by gender relations; for example males were not permitted to wear women's clothing, and residence staff generally failed to address the needs of transgender youth:

> Young man: They [a shelter] said, "No make-up, no nothing . . . Try to dress as masculine as you can."
>
> Young man: There's nowhere to put me. In the female section or the male section. So they put me in the hall . . . Basically people like me don't go there. They go elsewhere, or on the street to try to make their own way, trying to make enough money to get hotel rooms.

Non-white gay and bisexual youths' experience of the regulation of sexuality and masculinity through verbal and physical harassment was intertwined with racist harassment. In the following account, a gay youth of colour describes how he is pressured to defer to unequal racial relations:

> Young man: I get on very well with everyone so I don't have very much, I never have any problems with anyone because I'm an easy-going person, right. So that helped, that helped a lot. If I wasn't like that probably they would have make my life miserable . . . Usually, from time to time they would make fun of my English, because I don't speak really well. But I would laugh with them, I had to anyways [laughter] I had to. That was kind of embarrassing . . . [and] they'd call Black people who were there "nigger" and stuff like that.

The young women I interviewed occasionally talked about anti-lesbian verbal harassment. One woman was "outed" by a staff member before she herself had considered that she might be lesbian:

> Young woman: When I was 14, there was a worker there, she was pretty unprofessional. She would always call me a dyke. It was really wild. She told the other residents that I was a lesbian.

Young lesbian and bisexual women who stayed in mixed gender residences were also exposed to men's incessant anti-gay talk. This discourse did not usually recognise the existence of lesbianism, although young women reported some instances of verbal harassment in which the intertwining of gender relations with the social organization of sexuality was revealed:

> Young woman: They'd like, "Oh, he's a fag, he's a fag." Everyone knows he's a fag.
> Interviewer: And would they point out who's a dyke?
>
> Young woman: No, for some reason they don't care about lesbians whatsoever.
>
> Young woman: The guys are, like, it's a turn-on, "I'd like to see you guys go at it" or something. It's tacky.

Institutional regulation of lesbianism

Locating young lesbian and bisexual women who were willing to be interviewed about their experiences in group homes and shelters proved to be difficult. The young women who talked to me spoke angrily about the practices used by residential staff to regulate lesbianism and prevent lesbian relationships. They occasionally recounted stories about passing for heterosexual:

> Young woman: Right off the bat, when they did my assessment, it was pretty clear that, "Hey, no, this is wrong. This cannot carry on in this house." That's why I fed them all this garbage, saying, "No, no, no, I'm straight."

Most of the young women who came forward to be interviewed were openly lesbian or bisexual, and they described how staff responded when they revealed their sexual orientation. They were explicitly forbidden by staff to talk about this issue in the residence, were not given support in dealing with hostile residents, or in other ways were pressured to remain closeted:

> Young woman: I wasn't allowed to talk about my homosexuality. I wasn't allowed to talk about it at all. We used to have group meetings at night, um. And, like I was living with these people and when I wanted to tell them . . . I was basically told, "Don't talk about it, it's not an issue, it's not to be discussed here." But it was a big part of my life.
>
> Young woman: I told one of the other girls that I was gay before I told any of the staff. We had to share a room. So I thought, eh, if she sees these books, she's going to start wondering. So I just came out and told her. And she went, she requested to have a separate room.
>
> Interviewer: What happened?
>
> Young woman: She got it. They said, "Oh, what you said really scared her."
>
> Young woman: I'd sit down on the couch and they'd sit down beside me and then they'd realize who they were sitting down beside and move. This one woman, I had a bitch of a time with, like, you know what I mean. I worked damned hard to let her understand that I'm okay, I'm not going to give her the cooties or nothing. I'm not going to make a pass at her. She was very homophobic. She didn't know how to deal with it, um. Staff never helped me with it. I dealt with it on my own.

Some staff responses to lesbian residents involved the social organization of gender as well as sexuality:

> Young woman: I started dressing like Don Johnson. Big no-no. Big no-no. Staff would say, "You have to go change or you're not leaving the house."

Discourses about the "deviance" of homosexuality and lesbianism also appeared to organize staff practices of expressing doubt or denial when young women revealed that they were lesbian, rather than offering support or information:

> Young woman: They always asked me, "Are you sure, are you sure you're a lesbian? Are you sure?" . . . It really upset me because I was having to defend myself when I shouldn't.
>
> Young woman: A lot of the kids in the group homes, they don't have support. Their family won't accept them. They don't need workers not accepting them either.

The institutional silence surrounding sexuality and lesbianism was broken only by the requirements of regulating lesbian sexual expression and relationships:

> Interviewer: Would the staff ever talk about sexuality or sexual orientation?
>
> Young woman: No. Not that I recall. The only time any kind of issue like that was discussed was when I was involved with this woman.
>
> Young woman: I did pick up the feeling from them that they tried to protect me or they tried to hold me off from pursuing other relationships with the same sex. And, um they really tried to persuade me . . . [In one place] they outright told me, it was an all female group home, and, uh, they just said, "Look, if there's any lesbian activity here, you're out" . . . [In another place] I said, "If I ever get a girlfriend, you know, on the outside, am I allowed to bring her back and can she come and pick me up and can she visit me here?" Because they were very tight in their security at their place. And outright she said, "No." And I said, "Then how come other people can bring their boyfriends over?" . . . and it was just sloughed off. It was, like, "Well, that's totally different."

Even when lesbian relationships did not involve two residents, these relationships were seen as disruptive and one or both of the women were discharged (asked to leave):

> Young woman: I met this woman in there and we ended up having a little fling or whatever and they found out and I had to lie through my teeth, 'cause they were going to boot me out. Unfortunately this woman got booted out instead.
>
> Young woman: I became involved with another woman in the group home. It was said to "interfere with our treatment" and so it was supposed to end. And it continued so I was discharged.
>
> Young woman: They found out I was having a relationship with [a resident] and they forbid me to ever see her again. My relationship went out the window. And I have never ever said goodbye to her.

These practices failed to meet the needs of lesbian residents by ignoring the significance of relationships in the context of lesbian isolation within group homes and shelters. They also reveal the regulation of youth sexuality that pervades social services and other sectors of society.

The institutional concern with regulating lesbianism was also manifested in staff practices which depicted lesbians as introducing a sexual and even predatory element into relations among female residents and between residents and staff. Their presence disrupted heterosexual norms in which the absence of men meant creating "safe" spaces devoid of sexual content:

> Young woman: They discontinued my one-on-one [individual counselling.] And she was very effective with me, um. I could talk to her, I trusted her, um. And they told me I couldn't see her again. Because, you know, they said, one day I got sat down, and they said to me, "Look we think you like [X]." And I was, like, "Yeah, she's a good looking women. But what's your point?" And they said, "Well, who else do you think is good looking on the staff?" So I was, like, "So-and-so and so-and-so." And they wouldn't let me associate with those people."

An Aboriginal woman also described her experiences with staff practices that reproduced unequal racial relations by imposing harsher penalties and more prompt discharges for violating house rules upon youth of colour and Aboriginal youth, and drawing upon racist stereotypes to assume that those youth stole or abused alcohol and drugs. Racist verbal abuse was widespread in residences, and physical violence sometimes took place. 'Two-spirited' youth reported that white-dominated residences also reproduced the colonial subordination of Aboriginal people, as living in a group home meant being denied access to Native traditions concerning sexuality and gender, and being deprived of the support of family members. The following quote indicates the unequal relations between staff and residents that denied many young people the possibility of having their needs met:

> Young woman: We always took off, we didn't like it, 'cause they did nothing for us.

As I previously suggested, gender differences existed but were not dichotomous. Although it was not central to their experiences in residences, some gay and bisexual males described how staff would silence and control their sexuality. The dominant discourse concerning male homosexuality tolerated incessant anti-gay talk while discouraging gay-positive talk:

> Young man: They'd overheard us talking and they'd called us into the office and said we won't have that kind of talk here. And we weren't talking about having sex or anything like that. We were just talking about our feelings and we were called into the office and said they would not have that kind of talk here. But it's OK for these guys to sit and

talk about what they want to do to this girl or their girlfriends. As soon as we *mentioned* talking about guys it was a no-no. To me that wasn't right.

Young man: This is kind of sad. Because when I was in [a group home] two boys were caught together, and they kicked them out.

Interviewer: They were caught having sex?

Young man: Yeah, and they kicked them out of the house.

Pathologization of homosexuality and lesbianism

Both the young men and young women who were interviewed reported a number of staff practices that linked lesbian and gay male sexuality to psychological problems, abnormalities or illnesses. For example, homosexuality and lesbianism were implicitly labelled pathologies "caused" by childhood sexual abuse:

Interviewer: Did your worker ever raise the topic of sexual orientation?

Young man: All the time, talked about it all the time.

Interviewer: And what kinds of things would he say?

Young man: Basically what anybody else told me. He said it was okay to be gay, and he, a lot of the time actually he thought the reason why I was gay was because of me being sexually abused by another male.

Young woman: They said you have to see Dr. [X] . . . and within the 15 minutes that I met him until I walked out and told him to fuck himself, he was telling me how sick and, um, disturbed I am because I'm a lesbian. And I must have been sexually molested, and I must have been this and I must have been that.

Homosexuality was frequently belittled as "a phase that all youth went through," implying that it was an aberration from a norm:

Young man: I talked to [my worker] about what normal teenagers would ask, like . . . "Sleeping with another guy, is that normal?" He said, "Yeah, everybody has a gay experience, there's nothing really wrong with it." He goes, "But, you know everybody goes through that phase."

Residential staff also discussed homosexuality within the framework of "sexual problems" or "confusion" about sexual orientation:

Young man: I had to fill out this questionnaire and one thing on it was about sexual orientation, you know, and they just asked me, "Do you have any problems with my, you know, any concerns or questions about my sexual preferences." I told them straight out no.

In some types of group homes, especially residential treatment centres, where a variety of forms of counselling were central to the services provided, consultations with psychiatrists were utilised in "assessment" and "treatment" processes, and residents were frequently directed to seek therapy from psychiatrists:

> Interviewer: Did they ever offer you counselling about sexual orientation?
>
> Young man: Actually they recommended me to, ah, go to a couple of places. They wanted me to go to [a mental hospital] and I refused. And so they recommended me to go see a psychiatrist over at [a hospital] and I went to that for a while.
>
> Interviewer: And how was that?
>
> Young man: It was no help. None whatsoever. He wouldn't say anything, that's why it was no help . . .
>
> Interviewer: How come you didn't want to go to [the mental hospital]?
>
> Young man: Just the name scared me. It scared me, made me feel like I was some psychopath or something.
>
> Young man: The first thing the [group-home] father said was, "If you ever touch one of my sons, I'm going to kill you." . . . They said, "Maybe we can send you to a psychiatrist and maybe they can do something."

Residential staff and psychiatrists often confused homosexuality with gender identity or transgender issues:

> Young woman: They sent me to [a psychiatric hospital] and this doctor started talking to me and all of a sudden he got into my sexuality and I was, like "Yeah, I like women and what's your problem?" . . . He's asking me these questions about my sexuality. If I wanted a sex change. If I had this longing desire to have testicles and a penis . . . and he was telling me how expensive it was for women to get. And I was, like "Hold on here. I never said anything about a sex change. You asked me about my sexuality and that's all you asked me about. You send me downstairs and this guy's asking me if I want to be reformed in a man. And now you're giving me a price list. What the fuck is going on?"
>
> Young woman: How they dealt with the whole issue, I put it together and I went, "Fuck, they can't deal with this." They think it's a sickness. They think it's a psychiatric problem that needs to be balanced by drugs. And, um, I can't address it because of their issues.

As this former resident suggests, these practices appeared to be socially organized by professional discourses of homosexuality and lesbianism as pathological. They were also embedded within the prevalence of the casework model within social services.

Clients, especially children and youth, do not have the option of setting the agenda for their care. Professional practices, particularly in group

homes, required that staff "assess" clients, to determine which psychological or behavioural problems they were suffering from in order to provide the appropriate "treatment".

> Young woman: I just got reports from [a group home] um, and they're not the full reports, but enough to see where the fuck their mind was at. And just looking, from the stuff they had, their whole reports are based upon what they thought, not what I talked about, not what I shared with them, not on what was good for me, um, but totally on their thoughts and their analysis of me.

Contesting dominant discourses

A number of the female residents interviewed unexpectedly raised the issue of their different treatment in the small number of Toronto group homes and youth shelters that they identified as feminist, based on information that the staff had provided to them during their stay. Dominant discourses about homosexuality and lesbianism were contested in a variety of ways in these settings, providing lesbian-positive spaces for young women. As one resident said, "They set the pace for being very comfortable":

> Young woman: I've a lot of friends who stayed in the other places and hated them with a passion. But everyone who comes to [the feminist-led settings] loves it, you know. They'd like to move in and stay forever. [laughter] Just 'cause there's always support.

How is this achieved? The next quotation raises a number of interesting points. Discussions in an intake interview provided a new resident with the first evidence that this might be a welcoming environment. The staff member responded positively to the young woman's lesbianism and described herself as heterosexual revealing the influence of a radically different discourse of sexuality, one which recognized diverse sexual orientations as legitimate, and rendered them visible rather than submerging them under an assumed and universal heterosexuality. The resident then went on to say that her sense that this group home would be different was confirmed by staff attention to feminist issues. But ultimately, what met the needs of lesbian residents was the presence of openly lesbian staff:

> Interviewer: When you first went there, how did you know it was going to be a different kind of place?
>
> Young woman: I didn't. Because when I went in for my interview I came out, and I said "Is there any workers here that are lesbians or other residents or something?" She goes, "No, but we're heterosexuals and we're accepting," you know,"It's great." And they did a lot of women's issues and stuff there. And I felt kind of uncomfortable at first, because at that point I needed somebody to talk to. Later, when I came back,

there was four of them working there, four lesbians. It was really good, 'cause like residents get feelings out and they learn about it when there's lesbian workers to know what to say.

The positive acceptance of lesbianism was also made evident by the public display of lesbian literature, and information about events and community groups. Young lesbian and bisexual women were not only able to be open about their sexual orientation but could invite other young women to participate in lesbian events:

Young woman: On the bulletin boards and stuff like that you would see all this kind, all this information about, you know, women's dances and different organizations like the 519 [Community Centre.] And little pamphlets and stuff like that . . . I mean, there's always books on the shelf . . . And you get invitations too, even if they don't know if you're straight or not, you know. They still ask you, "You want to come with us? We're going Saturday night. Sign out overnight, maybe someone will pick you up." [laughter]

The young women's sense of a strong link between feminism and support to lesbians is shown below; in response to a question about how other residents are educated about sexual orientation, a young woman focused upon education about sexism:

Young woman: These four [lesbian] workers kept us pretty educated. Like the other residents that don't know much about it [lesbianism], they get educated in it . . . Like, if you say something that's putting women down, or something, they'll correct you. Like, you don't mean it, it's just something you say and think's okay, right, but it's really not. They'll correct you and say, "Listen, that's putting women down, and yourself down. It's putting survivors down." Like, they'll educate you and tell you why it was wrong to say that.

The interviews revealed other evidence that discourses of homosexuality and lesbianism as deviant and pathological were not totally dominant. Despite their negative experiences with group homes and youth shelters, many of the young people were self-confident and positive about their identities. As one Aboriginal man said, "I think it's the most wonderful thing to be gay." Some of the young people expressed appreciation for the support that particular staff members offered, or for help in dealing with, for example, childhood sexual abuse. A few viewed being forced to be closeted as less significant than the material help they received. But for most of the youth a thread of anger and resistance runs through their descriptions of life in residences. A sense of lesbian and gay political consciousness can be found in their critical voice, their protestations that "It's not fair," and their demands that services change:

> Young woman: I think a lot of [residents] are really confused. And, like, I never thought of being a lesbian or any of that kind of stuff. But that could have been a lot of my confusion and I could have saved me a lot of shit if they [staff] were educated in it and, you know, could pick up on things. If they knew anything they could've helped me.
>
> Young woman: I think they should have gay workers in there. I think they should have a lot more gay counsellors, gay workers, someone that someone gay could relate to. Because I'd feel a lot more comfortable being in a gay group home than a straight group home.

Many of the young people performed small acts of resistance, from speaking out against anti-gay talk, to making complaints about poor treatment by staff. Some of the lesbian youth were striking in their strength and their skills at working within the system in ways that challenged the staff and attempted, sometimes with success, to get their needs met:

> Young woman: I really felt that my sexuality and my size together, because I'm a big woman, saved my butt half the time, because, "Don't fuck around with me." That was my attitude on the street too. I had a lot of respect from that.
>
> Young woman: I've had a lot of workers come up to me and tell me that they're scared of me . . . in the sense that I know the system really well.
>
> Young woman: I used what was there, really well, and . . . I sucked the system dry.

Conclusion

The needs of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are not being met by group homes and youth shelters; indeed these young people are being exposed to considerable risk of verbal and physical abuse, institutional silencing and the pathologization and undermining of their sexual orientation. Interviews with young people suggest that this treatment is socially organized by professional discourses of homosexuality and lesbianism as deviant and pathological. Gender and racial relations also played a role, as well as institutional processes within child welfare and social work agencies, such as unequal relations between clients and workers and the prevalence of the casework model. These ruling relations were not totally dominant, but were contested by the young people themselves and by the existence of a few lesbian-positive feminist residences.

This research is useful because it reveals specific forms of heterosexual dominance in a particular location. There is a need for the proliferation of these types of studies. Investigating a range of different sites will make possible a broader theoretical analysis of the social organization of heterosexual

dominance. Dorothy Smith's conception of ruling relations has proven useful for this work because it allows discussions of heterosexual dominance at levels broader than that of the state, including state-funded social services and the professions.[26] This study also speaks to debates within social work and social policy by suggesting how social services reproduce relations of ruling in particular local sites, and extending the discussion from the more frequently investigated arenas of class and gender to include sexuality.

This research suggests a number of avenues for further investigation of residential services from the standpoint of lesbian and gay youth. At the level of the experiences of the young people only certain aspects of the social organization of staff responses are revealed; for these to be more fully understood there must be further research including, for example, interviews with staff members. The social organization of professional discourses about homosexuality and lesbianism, and other institutional processes that may contribute to residences treating gay, lesbian and bisexual youth as undeserving of safety, recognition and equal services needs to be explored. Examining the employment experiences of lesbian and gay residential workers would also throw some light on how the treatment of lesbian and gay youth is socially organized, as well as mapping another site of heterosexual dominance. Some of these questions are presently being investigated by the Sexual Orientation and Youth Program through interviews with front-line workers, supervisors and managers. The Sexual Orientation and Youth Program is developing a series of detailed recommendations for changes to group homes and youth shelters, and together with myself and others in the Toronto-based Coalition for Services for Lesbian and Gay Youth, a campaign is being developed to work for safe and equitable housing and child welfare services for lesbian, gay and bisexual youth.

NOTES

1. I am currently a doctoral student in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Toronto and was formerly a coordinator of the Sexual Orientation and Youth Program (SOYP), Central Toronto Youth Services. I am very grateful to the young people who made this work possible by describing to me how residences operate. I would also like to thank Laurie Bell and Robb Travers of the SOYP, Bill Downer and others at Street Outreach Services, the Coalition for Services for Lesbian and Gay Youth, Danny Firestone, Mary Gellatly, Wade Hillier, Didi Khayatt, John McCullagh, Eric Mykhalovskiy, George Smith, Susan Stewart, Cecilia Taiana, Cheryl Torrance, Mariana Valverde and (especially) Lorna Weir.
2. This literature includes E. Wilson, *Women and the Welfare State* (London: Tavistock, 1977); London-Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, *In and Against the State* (London: Pluto Press, 1979); M.J. Moreau, in collaboration with L. Leonard, *Empowerment through a Structural Approach to Social Work. A Report from Practice* (Montreal: École de service social, Université de

Montréal and Ottawa: School of Social Work, Carleton University, 1989); and R. Ng, *The Politics of Community Services. Immigrant Women, Class and State* (Toronto: Garamond, 1988).

3. See, for example, M. Foucault, *History of Sexuality Volume I. An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon, 1978); A. Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: A Journal of Women in Society*, 5, 4 (Summer 1980); G. Rubin, "Talking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" in C. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984); S. Epstein, "Gay Politics, Ethnic Identity. The Limits of Social Constructionism," *Socialist Review*, 17, 93/94 (May–August 1987); several chapters in D. Altman, T. van den Meer and A. van Kooten Niekerk, eds., *Homosexuality, Which Homosexuality?* (Amsterdam and London: An Dekker and GMP, 1989); and J. Weeks, *Against Nature. Essays on History, Sexuality and Identity* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1991).
4. Canadian contributions to this approach include: G. Smith, "Policing the Gay Community: An Inquiry into Textually-mediated Social Relations," *International Journal of the Sociology of Law*, 16:163–183 (1988); B. Ross, "Heterosexuals Only Need Apply. The Secretary of State's Regulation of Lesbian Existence," *Resources for Feminist Research*, 17, 3, (Sept. 1988):35–38; and E. Mykhalovskiy and G. Smith, *Hooking Up to Social Services. A Report on the Barriers People Living with HIV/AIDS Face Accessing Social Services* (Toronto: Community AIDS Treatment Information Exchange, 1993). See also historical work such as G. Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire. Sexuality in Canada* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1987); and M.B. Duberman, M. Vicinus and G. Chauncey Jr., eds., *Hidden from History: Reclaiming the Gay and Lesbian Past* (New York: New American Library, 1989).
5. My use of the term discourse draws upon Dorothy Smith's notion of "textually-mediated discourse" to mean not only texts but also the ways in which they are socially organized, for example, how they are produced, taken up or institutionally coordinated. See D.E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), p. 214.
6. On sexual regulation see M. Valverde and L. Weir, "The Struggles of the Immoral: Preliminary Remarks on Moral Regulation," *Resources for Feminist Research*, 17, 3, (Sept. 1988):31–34.
7. Children's Aid Society of Metropolitan Toronto, "A Look at 1991," n.d.
8. E.M. Roche, "Residential Care for Lesbian and Gay Adolescents," in S. Bergstrom and L. Cruz, eds., *Counselling Lesbian and Gay Male Youth. Their Special Lives/Special Needs* (Washington, D.C.: The National Network of Runaway and Youth Services, 1983), p. 48; A. Steinhorn, "Lesbian Adolescents in Residential Treatment," *Social Casework*, 60, (Oct. 1979):494.
9. P. Gibson, "Developing Services for Lesbian and Gay Youth in a Runaway Shelter," in Bergstrom and Cruz, *Counselling Lesbian and Gay Male Youth*, p. 34; Roche, "Residential Care," p. 48.
10. S. Saperstein, "Lesbian and Gay Adolescents. The Need for Family Support," *Catalyst*, 3, 4 (1981):65.

11. G. Belitsos, "Rural Lesbian and Gay Youth: Implications for the Youth Worker," in Bergstrom and Cruz, op. cit.; P. Gibson, in Bergstrom and op. cit., p. 67; P. Gibson, "Gay Male and Lesbian Youth Suicide," in M.R. Feinleib, ed., *Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Youth Suicide. Vol. 3. Preventions and Interventions in Youth Suicide* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1989), p. 113.
12. Gibson, "Developing Services," p. 34.
13. Gibson, "Youth Suicide," pp. 3–113; T.L. Vergara, "Meeting the Needs of Sexual Minority Youth: One Program's Response," in R. Schoenberg and R.S. Goldberg, eds., *Homosexuality and Social Work* (New York: Haworth, 1984), p. 24.
14. Saperstein, "Lesbian and gay adolescents," p. 64.
15. Anonymous, "Without Comment," *The Social Worker*, 56, 2 (1988):76.
16. Prairie Research Associates and Gay and Lesbian Youth Services Network, *Survey of Lesbian and Gay Youth and Professionals Who Work with Youth* (Winnipeg, 1989), p. 19.
17. Didi Khayatt at York University and George Smith at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education have conducted research on the barriers to education for lesbian and gay youth. The publication of their findings will be an important contribution to the literature.
18. Thanks to Eric Mykhalovskiy, George Smith and Lorna Weir for discussions concerning this approach.
19. D.E. Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1987), pp. 3, 160.
20. D.E. Smith, *The Conceptual Practices of Power. A Feminist Sociology of Knowledge* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 34.
21. The participants were paid $20 as compensation for their time.
22. This approach drew on discussions with George Smith on ethnomethodology, for example,;H. Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967); and on E.G. Mishler, *Research Interviewing. Context and Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986).
23. Complete anonymity was guaranteed to everyone I interviewed and names, places and any other identifying details have been deleted or changed to protect their identities. Each person is identified as "young woman" or "young man".
24. "Two-spirited" is the term used by many Aboriginal gays and lesbians to identify themselves.
25. This area is Toronto's gay neighbourhood.
26. Regarding moral regulation by non-state as well as state institutions see Valverde and Weir, "The Struggles of the Immoral."