New Institutionalism and Sexuality at Work in Local Government

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Recent statutory and policy changes have raised the profile of lesbian, gay and bisexual equalities initiatives in the local government arena. These initiatives are increasingly developed and delivered via inter-agency partnerships. This article applies concepts from the sociological branch of new institutionalism to the field of sexualities equalities partnership work in local government, drawing on findings from a large empirical project. Notions of norms, ritual, templates and isomorphism all have purchase in this sensitive, value-laden field, providing insight into the organizational dynamics associated with inter-agency and partnership working. The article introduces the notion of institutional hybridization as a means of understanding the collaborative, and sometimes conflicting, processes associated with governance in the field of sexualities equalities work.

Keywords: sexuality, equalities, diversity, new institutionalism, lesbian, gay and bisexual, organizational culture

Introduction

The 1980s saw the unprecedented development of lesbian and gay equalities work in local government in Britain (Cooper, 1994a). By 1992 most of this work had been downgraded, due to a severe right-wing backlash, the introduction of section 28 and other factors such as the Conservative’s attack on local government (Cooper, 1994b). A second wave of sexualities work has subsequently developed, involving equal opportunity policies for staff and service users and initiatives in a number of service areas including housing, adoption and fostering, education, leisure, support for people with HIV/AIDS, licensing and library provision and symbolic initiatives and community safety.

Equalities work is increasingly supported by local government modernization. From 2005 onwards, the Comprehensive Performance Assessment
includes attention to diversity and service users’ perspective (IDeA, 2005). The Equalities Standard is now adopted by 90 per cent of UK local authorities (IDeA, n.d.). The Employment Equalities (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003 and the Gender Recognition Bill, 2003 place requirements on local authorities concerning sexual orientation and transgender equality, and the abolition of s 28 in 2004 has enabled work to be taken forward in local authorities in a way that has previously been difficult in England and Wales. Other changes, such as the Civil Partnerships Bill (2004), support equality more widely. However, sexualities and transgender equality work has remained uneven, both across authorities and within them. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) people continue to face discrimination in a number of ways (Monro, 2005; Press for Change, n.d.).

This article aims to explore the field of local government lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) equalities work, using concepts drawn from the sociological branch of new institutionalist theory. New institutionalists share a core concern with institutions as formal and informal structures which affect individual behaviour over time, and which involve a certain amount of shared meaning (Peters, 1999). The main strands of new institutionalist theory include rational choice approaches (Bell, 2002), political science approaches (Aspinwall and Schneider, 2002) normative institutionalism, historical institutionalism (Bell, 2002; Peters, 1999; Staffen, 2005), economic new institutionalism (Wailes et al., 2003), organizational new institutionalism and sociological approaches (March and Olsen, 1984; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). New institutionalism has different meanings in different disciplines. Even within disciplines there are a variety of positions regarding issues, such as the relative importance of micro and macro processes (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991), as well as a varied use of new institutionalist theory (Davies, 2004). There is also cross fertilization between the disciplines, so that, for example, Brinton and Nee (1998) develop a form of sociological institutionalism that draws on economic and rational choice approaches. This article focuses only on certain aspects of sociological new institutionalist theory, although it draws on organizational approaches to an extent. It will follow Peters (1999) in defining institutions as the cognitive, normative and regulative structures and activities that give meaning and stability to social behaviour. The article focuses in particular on the way in which ‘institutions are systems of meaning and their behaviour and the behaviour of individuals within them depend on the meanings incorporated and the symbols manipulated’ (Peters, 1999, p. 103).

This article addresses a gap in the literature. There has been some work in the field of local government and governance (Lowndes and Wilson, 2003; O’Malley, 2004), but there is a lack of research concerning local government equalities work, partnership working and new institutionalism. In addition, local sexualities equalities initiatives that were previously located in the boundaries of local authorities are increasingly addressed via partnership
working. The sociological new institutionalist literature often assumes that organizations are discrete. Discrete organizational boundaries are problematized by partnerships concerning sexualities equalities. This raises interesting questions about the concepts developed by new institutionalists and provokes the development of notions of institutional hybridization to describe the ways in which organizational cultures in the sexualities equalities arena merge or remain discreet. Building on the work of Lowndes (2001), the article argues that, whilst governance involves shifting allegiances and agendas, and colliding organizational norms, there may be some level of institutional hybridization taking place. The article adopts an interpretivist, constructivist approach that is perhaps in line with that taken by Bevir and Rhodes (2003) in their analysis of governance. However, broader engagement with the many debates within the burgeoning field of governance studies (Bevir and Rhodes, 2003; Coulson, 2004; Rhodes, 1997; Salamon, 2002; Stoker, 2000) is outside the remit of this piece.

The article begins with an overview of the methodology of the research. It then provides a brief account of sociological new institutionalism in order to situate the following analysis. Subsequently it outlines some of the concepts used in sociological new institutionalism before examining their relevance to the data on sexualities equalities initiatives in local government. The article then explores these concepts in relation to governance and sexualities equalities work and discusses institutional hybridization. The article foregrounds analysis of subjective processes, rather than the link between informal norms and formal institutions (see Nee, 1998). It will not deal with the frameworks associated with different political parties (these are addressed in Monro, 2006).

**Methodology**

The article draws on data from a qualitative two-year, ESRC-funded project which aimed to explore the development of lesbian and gay local government equalities work between 1990 and 2000. The project involved case studies of 12 local authorities that were conducting some sexualities equalities work. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with approximately 100 councillors, community members and employees in partner agencies spread across 12 case-study localities. The sample was primarily purposive, rather than representative, but it was chosen to include authorities in Scotland, Wales and the Midlands, as well as northern and southern England. We ensured that urban, rural and metropolitan authorities were represented, as well as those that engaged in equalities work in the 1980s and those that did not, authorities of different political colours, and two-tier and unitary authorities. We also interviewed key national figures accessed through snowballing and via calls placed in the national LGB community press. Interviews were
recorded and transcribed fully, or in some cases in note form, prior to analysis. Dissemination included the production of a brief of findings for contributors and the organization of a national workshop.

**Sociological forms of new institutionalism**

Sociological new institutionalism can be understood by comparing it briefly to other forms of new institutionalism. Economic and political new institutionalisms have emphasized formal norms, such as rules and statutes. Economic forms of new institutionalism have also focused on the individual as utilitarian, with people choosing to act in certain ways based on rational choice. Sociological new institutionalists also see individual action as being purposive, but emphasize the way in which people make choices based on incomplete information, and social pressures as well as economic ones (Nee, 1998). Nee traces the origins of sociological new institutionalism to the classical sociologists, including Max Weber, for whom:

> The institutional framework encompassed customs, conventions, social norms, religious and cultural beliefs, households, kinship, ethnic boundaries, organizations, community, class, status groups, markets, the law and the state. (Nee, 1998, citing *Economy and Society*, p. 6)

Social norms are defined as ‘implicit or explicit rules of expected behaviour that embody the interests and preferences of members of a close-knit group or community’ (Nee, 1998, p. 8). They are maintained by ‘informal mechanisms of monitoring, such as social approval or disapproval’ (Nee and Ingram, 1998, p. 19), so that over time, they become self-sustaining (Nee, 1998). Symbols and stories play a role in social ordering within organizations (March and Olsen, 1984). Actors in organizations are ‘kept in line’ through a variety of controls, such as hierarchies and sanctions (Lowndes, 1996, p. 184). Most individuals cannot even conceive of other courses of action; people are ‘embedded’ in social and political relationships that are beyond their control (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991).

According to Nee (1998), organizations are more effective when formal norms (institutional rules and structures) are congruent (closely coupled) with informal norms, because there are lower social and economic costs associated with maintaining organizational structures (Nee, 1998). The decoupling of formal and informal norms occurs when formal rules diverge from the preferences and interests of subgroups in the institution. This can allow for flexibility in practice while formal institutional stability is maintained. However, a decoupling of formal and informal norms can also lead to the development of ‘opposition norms’ when the institutional sanctions are weak in relationship to contradictory subgroup interests (Nee and Ingram, 1998).³
As noted above, this article seeks initially to apply some of the concepts developed by sociological new institutionalists to sexualities equalities work in local government. It will begin by looking at norms, sanctions, symbols and stories before looking at institutional fields (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991) and isomorphism (Peters, 1999; Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). Issues concerning the coupling and decoupling of norms will be dealt with throughout the article, where relevant.

Norms and sanctions

Norms and sanctions are important in affecting the way that local authorities address LGBT equalities issues. Research findings indicated that in some cases norms and sanctions were utilized to provide support for sexualities equalities work. For example, contributors referred to norms concerning diversity and, in one instance, an authority imposed organizational sanctions on departments that did not enable staff members to attend a lesbian and gay forum. Various symbolic initiatives supporting sexualities equalities work were accepted; for instance some local authorities flew the rainbow flag on LGBT Pride day. Some authorities also provided key figures to play a symbolic role in major events such as conferences; this was seen as important by a few contributors because it provided a legitimation for LGB work. In some instances, the impact of symbolic initiatives in real terms (such as increased service provision) was negligible; instead they served to support the rhetoric of statutory agencies being progressive and active.

In some cases, norms and sanctions inhibited LGBT work — homophobia was evident in some authorities. The most obvious form of homophobia was indirect; simply a lack of ease about LGBT people and issues, sometimes linked with a broader discomfort about sexuality. In at least two authorities involved in our study, the unease was so marked that people did not even want to use the words ‘lesbian and gay’, as the following quotation shows:

(Officer) Politicians, they’re a long way from being able to even talk about those issues.

(Interviewer) There would be resistance to even using the words ‘lesbian and gay’?

(Officer) Yes, I think with the current leadership, yes. (Officer, northern local authority)

Several contributors described discomfort concerning same-sex sexuality as being a sanction on initiatives in their local authority. One former community safety officer described the way in which, when lesbian and gay initiatives in her authority became too successful, people became ‘very nervous’. Homophobic attitudes were related to wider social norms concerning prejudice against LGBT people:
A history of cultural homophobia in the north-east of Scotland has led to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community of Aberdeen being the least visible of the equality target groups. (Aberdeen City Council, 2002, p. 1)

Stories played a role in the construction of sexualities work, particularly stories about the 1980s and the backlash against authorities perceived to be ‘loony’. These narratives were used as a sanction against sexualities work in some authorities, or used to make distinctions between supposedly ‘radical’ work that took place in the 1980s and subsequent developments. In one authority a story about a council-supported gay men’s swimming club continued to be quoted in local authority settings as an example of ‘the way not to do things’ for as long as a decade after the event took place, and in another, which provided a small amount of funding for self-defence classes for lesbians, the topic of ‘lesbian gym mats’ became a metaphor for ‘loonyness’. The impact of stories about lesbian and gay work is documented in the literature. Davina Cooper discusses Hackney Council’s reaction to head teacher Jane Brown’s description of the ballet Romeo and Juliet as heterosexist, and her lack of interest in subsidized tickets: the council showed ‘anger and disbelief’ at Brown’s decision — an action seen as reflecting the council’s wish to distance themselves from their previous, radical reputation (Cooper, 1997, p. 503).

Overall, norms, sanctions, symbols and stories can be seen to be relevant to the field of sexualities equalities work in local government.

Institutional fields

Powell and DiMaggio (1991) suggest that institutional or cultural, fields (sets of norms) define concepts such as equality. ‘These cultural fields offer a variety of symbolic and cultural systems from which organizations choose’ (Koelbe, 1995, p. 235). They stem from policy and legal frameworks and from professional bodies as well as other sources. The concept of institutional fields has been extended by Lowndes, who says:

Institutionalization has been seen as a process whereby ‘mythic’ or ‘symbolic’ elements of an organization’s environment are incorporated into its structures, cultures and outputs.... Such elements form ‘templates’ for organizing and derive from professions, educational and training programmes, legal and public policy frameworks, public opinion and prevalent ideologies. (Lowndes, 1996, p. 185)

Overall, research findings support the application of notions of institutional fields to the area of sexualities equalities work in local government. Several overlapping fields concerning sexualities work have emerged since the 1980s and are now evident in local authorities, with differences existing within departments depending on their cultures and norms. In adoption and fostering departments lesbians and gay men were seen as a resource in almost all
of the authorities that took part in the study. Overall, authorities varied widely in the way that local government work was framed; in one case, a community member working in a rural area said,

Lesbian and gay is not explicitly mentioned in any of the councils I work in: they are defined as ‘other’. The buzzwords are, ‘working with hard to reach communities’;6 ‘difficult issues’, ‘people who are marginalised and disenfranchised’.

In many cases, weak liberalism (Cooper, 1994a) informs the construction of sexualities work, with LGB people being framed to a degree as victims of discrimination or hate crime and as being vulnerable groups:

I think the council is generally sympathetic and generally tries as best as any large organization to accommodate equality issues; lesbian, gay and bisexual, I don’t whether they are looked on as a poor relations … you can see that someone — perhaps the ethnic issues, the elderly persons’ issues, disabled people’s issues — there is perhaps sometimes — a problem might be in some people’s views … perhaps older councillors thinking that it is not something that we should be looking at, at all — ‘OK, if they want to get on with their life then get on with their life and don’t pay any particular special issue to it’ but that is not necessarily what I think. As much as people are what they are and sometimes that can be held against them unreasonably and unfairly and disadvantaged and I don’t think that is right. We have to do whatever we can whatever people’s particular handicap they may be facing to make the playing field as level as possible.

(Councillor, Midlands authority)

The ways in which LGB work is framed in local government provides a reflection on wider debates in the equalities arena, especially those concerning equal opportunities and diversity approaches to equalities work (Liff, 1996; Webb, 1997) and the perceived appropriateness of state intervention in addressing discrimination (Bagilhole, 1993).7 Research findings supported Webb’s (1997) assertion that there has been a shift towards notions of diversity, as, for example, when an officer said:

We don’t talk about equality; our thing is valuing diversity. My interpretation of diversity is that it is looking at everyone as unique, that all have different things to bring forward. A recognition of people’s right to be different.

The focus is widened with respect to excluded groups, so that bisexual and transgender people are more likely to be included than previously. For example, a Councillor remarked on the increasing use of the term LGBT as a catch-all phrase that reflects the council’s commitment to sexual diversity. Diversity is seen as including everyone, even those who hold greater social privilege. The ‘diversities’ approach was described by some contributors as less
effective in tackling inequalities, because it was individualistic and failed to address structural, group-based inequalities — a finding that is supported by the literature (Webb, 1997; see also Bagilhole, 1993). Another change in the way equalities work is framed concerns the notion of service responsiveness, which is part and parcel of ‘Best Value’ and other local authority frameworks, and which constructs service users in terms of need as well as consumption. Several contributors discussed responsiveness to ‘everybody’s needs’, a notion which includes lesbians and gay men. A further change concerns the business template, where LGBT equality is framed in terms of the ‘Pink Pound’ and urban regeneration.

Disjunctions between different organizational fields concerning LGBT work are evident in local authorities, particularly in areas that concern the visibility of same-sex desire. Public sex is problematic for authorities; the norms of certain sections of gay culture, where public sex is seen as desirable and part of the gay scene, clash with the dominant norms concerning privacy (particularly concerning gay sex). One officer discussed publicizing adoption and fostering for same-sex couples in a lesbian magazine, and said she would have to avoid the ‘one with the dildos in’ as this would be unacceptable to local authority players. Here, the norms associated with some sections of the lesbian scene clash uncomfortably with the asexual, heterosexist way that parenthood is constructed (there are far fewer LGB magazines available than magazines concerning heterosexuality, for example weddings, meaning that sexually explicit material is included together with other types of material). It is at these edges that we can see the ways in which organizational fields fail to mesh. Such instances exemplify organizational decoupling (see Nee and Ingram, 1998). Where public sex initiatives are successful, it has entailed police officers and others working with the gay communities to overcome (or manage) the disjunctions between the different frameworks. The police become somewhat ‘queered’ — by going to gay clubs and condoning consensual adult gay sex — and the gay community is less severely policed in return for help in dealing with issues such as teenage prostitution.

**Isomorphism**

Another concept provided by sociological new institutionalist theory is termed isomorphism. This is concerned with the symbolic dimensions of organizations, so that ‘institutions are systems of meaning, and their behaviour and the behaviour of individuals within them depend on the meanings incorporated and the symbols manipulated’ (Peters, 1999, p. 103). Organizations attempt to gain legitimacy by manipulating the meanings associated with them by copying other organizations. Powell and DiMaggio (1991) claim that this process leads to inertia and homogenization, because conformist institutional environments tend to be more common than those which challenge the status quo. They identify three types of isomorphism:
mimetic (in which organizations copy each other in order to win legitimacy), coercive (in which the state obliges organizations to adopt particular practices), and normative, which is linked to the development of new rules and to professional networks (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). This article will address only mimetic isomorphism. A more in-depth examination of isomorphism in local government is provided by Bowerman (2002).

Research findings provide limited support for the use of notions of isomorphism in the field of sexualities work in local government (see also Kraatz and Zajac, 1996). Contributors in local authorities discussed various means of ensuring that sexualities work was seen as legitimate, including preparing the ground ‘by making sure that there was a body of opinion supporting policies which wasn’t going to go away; it was justifiable’ (former chief executive, southern authority). They sometimes took a routinized administrative approach, drawing on the work of other organizations, utilizing relevant legislation such as the Crime and Disorder Act and the Local Government Act. They also tended to utilize organizational fields concerning social inclusion, diversity, equality, need and community safety. Although there was some level of tendency towards standardization, there was also a considerable amount of diversity. Research findings indicated that both the types of framework adopted ‘equalities’ versus ‘diversity’, and the location and form of initiatives varied quite widely across authorities. There was a certain amount of cross-fertilization between proactive authorities, where actors would seek out examples of good practice from other authorities and copy it, or where examples of authorities that are seen as progressive are used by actors as a way of shaming their own authority into action, but this did not seem to be very common. The lack of mimetic isomorphism may be related to a relative absence of formal norms concerning sexualities equalities work and a related lack of normative isomorphism. It appears that initiatives in the field of race equality may be more homogenous because of the impact of legislative imperatives which encourage a certain amount of uniformity across authorities. In addition, it may be linked with the need for the normative decoupling that followed the labelling of left-wing councils who conducted lesbian and gay equalities work in the 1980s as ‘looney’ (see Cooper, 1994a). The 1980s norms concerning lesbian and gay equalities work became a political liability for these councils, and for others who sought to do work in the field later on. Councils appear to have dealt with this problem by framing sexualities work in other ways, as discussed above, and by seeking to avoid copying the approaches and norms of the 1980s.

Partnerships and inter-agency working

New institutionalist theory clearly has some general purchase in the analysis of sexualities work in local government. How can it be applied to partnership
and inter-agency working concerning sexualities equality? Overall, the 1990s saw a proliferation of various forms of inter-agency collaboration. This growth was apparent in the sexualities equality arena, with several research contributors saying that there has been an increase in inter-agency and multi-agency sexualities work during the 1990s. The most substantial amount of sexualities work took place via partnerships or fora. The areas where inter-agency work was most apparent were health, specifically safer sex promotion and HIV services (especially in the 1990s), lesbian and gay adoption and fostering and community safety. There is a range of documentary evidence supporting the existence of partnerships which affect the field of sexualities work (Nottingham Community Safety and Youth Justice Partnership, 2001; Southwark Campaign Against Hate Crimes, 2001 and the Greater Manchester Lesbian and Gay Policing Initiative, undated). Alliances can be developed between unusual partners. Manchester City Council, the local police, the local Tourist Board and the local gay community backed a move to bring the gay EuroGames to Manchester (Mallor, 1996). In addition to initiative-related partnerships, there are also a number of LGB fora at a local level. These act as consultation bodies and include a range of partners; community members, and often local authority officers and members, police representatives, health authority representatives, local businesses and members of other services such as Probation (Brighton Lesbian and Gay Community Safety Forum report, 1999/2000). Sexualities-relevant consultation also took place via a range of other consultative processes, for instance, discussions with tenants and community planning. Informal networks are also apparent. For instance, one officer said:

We have good relations with a number of voluntary organizations, and X [a voluntary organization] is one of these. We see them as a good resource enabling decision-making and consultation. It is a nice symbiotic relationship.

How does the sociological branch of new institutionalism, including notions of norms, symbols, sanctions and stories, institutional fields and processes of mimetic isomorphism apply to networks and partnerships in the sexualities equality arena? Norms concerning joined-up working and partnerships contribute to the institutional fields supporting sexualities equality work at a local level. Inter-agency working was linked with norms concerning collaboration. For instance:

The working group heard evidence from a 1997 anti-homophobia audit of local mental health services … there was shared commitment to identify best practice and participate in future training if it was provided. (Brighton Lesbian and Gay Community Safety Forum Annual Report, 1999/2000, p. 8)

The Partnership aims.… to ensure a focused approach to community safety by aligning the policies of key agencies and reaching agreement on
Informal and formal norms specific to partnership working have been developed. These are found, in particular, in the local and national compacts — voluntary codes of conduct concerning the relationships between voluntary/ community and statutory sectors that are forged via negotiation between the different sectors (Craig et al., 2002). The research findings indicated that partnerships and networks concerning sexuality equalities were underpinned by norms concerning the importance of partnership working, as when a councillor described inter-agency work as ‘essential — in any type of LGBT work — you can’t do it in isolation. All the agencies which employ, house people, etc., should be involved’. Discourses concerning maturity were also evident in a few cases:

I do feel there’s a good network here, I do feel it’s quite strong, and we do communicate, and we do rally. I think we do quite well to support each other, and I think it certainly feels like we’ve got a grown-up way of working on an inter-agency level … I think it’s (inter-agency work) crucial at a lot of levels, because I think with all the talk of joined-up policies, that doesn’t happen in reality … for example, one of the reasons the (organization) finds it hard to access public funding is that we don’t sit neatly in any council department. You know, we cut across social inclusions … a whole load of different departments … I think the value of inter-agency work is that it makes those connections. (Community member, Scotland)

In some cases norms were used to influence proceedings concerning partnership working in the field of sexualities. For example, in a couple of cases partnership bodies were able to put pressure on recalcitrant local authorities into carrying out work using discourses of equality. In other instances, sanctions prevented lesbian and gay inclusion:

We have tried for two and a half years to get in (to the local social inclusion partnership). The Council has enabled us to get in to some extent … (the blocks are) values and attitudes — this is why convincing and PR are so important. (Community member, Scotland)

The concept of mimetic isomorphism is relevant to partnership work concerning sexualities equalities, although there is also considerable variety in the types of partnership in this field. The adoption of certain norms, especially those concerning the validity of partnership working, appears to give organizations legitimacy and draw support, as does the assumption of professional norms by community members. These norms tend to lead towards a certain level of homogeneity, supporting the notions of isomorphism that are found in the literature (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). Isomorphism occurs when organizations adapt to funding body expectations (see Lowndes, 1996;
Newman, 2001b). Several community members emphasized the way in which they adopted professional language and forms of presentation in order to gain legitimacy, and in some cases, they presented their work in different ways, depending on the people they were seeking to influence. For example, one community member described the way in which

the whole thing about framing things and how we address particular agendas is part of that learning curve, so, like knowing when to say ‘LGBT’, or when to say ‘lesbian and gay’, or ‘lesbian and gay and bisexual, it’s just a sort of practicality, in some ways it doesn’t matter, but in other contexts it’s very, very important.

In addition, certain frames are used in a way that confers legitimacy to sexualities work, as one Welsh community member said, ‘we managed to get things through by putting them on the crime and disorder hook. This gave it credibility — we never would have done it otherwise’.

Notions of loosely and closely coupled norms are relevant to an analysis of inter-agency working. Greenwood and Hinings (1996) suggest that innovation is more likely in ill-defined or loosely coupled organizational fields, because organizational norms are more flexible. They suggest that regulatory pressures are usually reinforced and clear in government sectors, preventing the formation of loose organizational fields. This dynamic is altered to an extent by the development of forms of partnership working. These ‘loose’ systems would seem, following Greenwood and Hinings (1996), to support innovation. Sexualities work could arguably be seen as one aspect of innovative social policy in a local context and, as shown above, it does often take place in the context of partnership working. The looser organizational forms that partnerships allow enables contentious work to be located away from institutional fields that would prohibit it. For example, in one authority, most of the sexualities work was framed via community safety and located outside an authority described by a number of players as homophobic, enabling norms within the organizationally well-defined authority to be preserved. However, partnerships can also block innovation. It depends on the norms that different agencies bring to it. In a minority of localities, local authorities proved to be recalcitrant players at the partnership table, attempting to prevent proactive work concerning sexualities equalities taking place. As Greenwood and Hinings (1996) say, it is necessary to look at the internal complexity of organizations, including the processes that lead to different structural arrangements, in understanding institutional dynamics.

**Hybridization**

This section explores analysis of partnership working using notions of hybridization. As shown above, research findings suggest that new
in institutionalist notions of norms, symbols, sanctions, stories and isomorphism have some purchase when applied to systems of partnership working. However, partnerships do not have the boundaries associated with the institutional forms described by authors such as Grenstad and Selle (1995). Inter-agency working and partnerships entail a greater permeability of institutional boundaries than that frequently addressed by sociological new institutionalist theory. Arguably, with partnership and inter-agency working, subjective processes — as well as the organizational structures — become more complex, fluid and unbounded. Although the overlap and fusion of different organizational fields is hardly new, partnerships can be seen to increase the extent to which this is taking place. Notions of the coupling and decoupling of organizational norms, while useful, may not fully capture the organizational processes that are taking place. Partnerships and networks are held by overarching templates based on notions of collaboration and participation. Within these frameworks, new alliances are being forged, and organizations that have very different institutional fields are working together. The hybridization that may be taking place can be related to processes of mimetic isomorphism. However, it appears to be different in some cases because it does not concern just homogenization; rather, new organizational fields may be emerging.

Institutional hybridization, or the fusion of different organizational fields and emergence of new fields, was evident in the research findings where the discourses of mainstream organizations were adopted but altered by community organizations, or vice versa. Hybridization also appeared to take place when different styles of working were merged. Some voluntary and community sector organizations have ‘flat’, co-operative organizational forms and a set of values that support this (Oerton, 1996). These frameworks stand in contrast to the hierarchical norms embodied in statutory organizations, and in some cases a combination of hierarchical and ‘flat’ organizational forms has developed due to the shift towards partnership working. Hybridization occurs when different organizations collaborate on projects, such as HIV or community safety work. The projects, and the inter-agency partnerships or networks that are forged around these issues seem to develop their own organizational culture. This seems to consist typically of a mixture of professional norms drawn from players’ experiences of working in statutory or voluntary agencies and radical pluralist or liberal norms concerning sexuality and gender. For example, in one case the community safety forum was more radical concerning sexuality than any of the statutory agencies that contributed staff, but it adopted professionalized, statutory-sector type methods of working. This forum worked with the police, the local authority and the general public in organizing conferences and the Mardi Gras. The institutional field that developed was different to anything previously found in that locality. One community member described the changes as ‘amazing’, whilst a police contributor discussed a turnaround in the attitudes of
community members from hostile to collaborative. This process does not appear to be adequately described by notions of closely coupled norms, as the norms of the two groups were initially different and in conflict.

Hybridization in the area of sexualities equalities governance seems to centre, overall, around the development of shared norms concerning support for LGB people and communities, notions of inclusion and equality, and the professionalization of community activism. It appears to be a useful complement to the new institutionalist concepts of institutional norms, fields, mimetic isomorphism and coupling/decoupling. However, there are some difficulties associated with the notion of hybridization. Some of these relate to broader issues concerning partnership working, as described in the literature. Ruchmer and Pallis (2003) describe difficulties with the blurring of boundaries in partnership working, while O’Malley (2004), in a study of community engagement in partnerships, found that there was a complex interaction between community acceptance and the rejection of norms associated with partnership working. Davies (2004) in a study of regeneration partnerships found that ‘partnerships are unstable ensembles where values clash, interests differ, state-centred hierarchies persist’ (2004, p. 570). Similarly, ‘One of my interviewees referred to the “irregular heartbeat” of the partnership she was involved in, as new institutional frameworks were negotiated across organizational boundaries and cultures’ (Lowndes, 2001, p. 1962). Findings from this study reflected some of these difficulties. A few community members discussed difficulties with staff attrition and restructuring in the statutory sector, which meant that the partnerships were unstable. And, importantly, one of the norms of inter-agency working appeared to be implicit acknowledgement of power differentials. Conflicts tended to be brushed over. When they erupted, as in the case of one London borough, where requests from the community members were made via a community safety forum, they were subdued by framing them as ‘inappropriate’; and outside the remit of the forum. Overall, the idea of institutional hybridization could lend itself to a homogenized model of institutional cultures, whereas in reality a range of organizational fields overlap, coalesce and fragment.

Institutional hybridization appears to be related to close coupling between norms, including those held by individuals. Where there are divergences in the attitudes of key figures, segmentation of the inter-agency grouping or network takes place, or work is blocked. For instance, in one authority, a LGB forum was successful in bringing about some changes in the local authority stance and provision. For instance, in one authority, a LGB forum was successful in bringing about some changes in the local authority stance and provision. Hybridization was apparent in the joint approach to different issues taken by the LGB forum. For instance, the forum tackled another agency because they withheld a large amount of HIV-designated funding from the gay community. This involved a shared sense of the validity of gay-specific health interventions. This forum was attended by a councillor who was proactive concerning LGB equalities; his values concerning LGB equality matched those of the community members fairly closely. When
he was replaced by a councillor who was uncomfortable with LGB issues, the effect of the forum was minimized. In another case, conflicts emerged in a Mardi Gras committee due to concerns about the council’s stance and local business support for the event (*Pink Paper*, 1998). In this case, the local gay and lesbian committee provided a powerful lobby and hybridized institutional norms focused around efficiency and viability. It seems that agencies that have previously hybridized can fragment away from each other. For instance, a community contributor from a community organization that had adopted professionalized templates said, ‘we have “love-ins” — meetings where it is all, “how are you?” kissie kissie — this is senior people — but this is not what I am there for’. Here, the professionalized norms adopted by the community contributor clashed with the community norms that appear to have been taken on by statutory players, and hybridization did not occur. Overall, therefore, hybridization may be limited to situations where there is a certain level of concurrence between players.

**Conclusion**

Analysis of the field of sexualities initiatives provides overall support for the application of the insights provided by the sociological and organizational wings of new institutionalism to partnership working. Partnership working also provokes the expansion of this branch of new institutionalism, because it involves a less bounded, more fluid set of institutional relationships and a certain amount of institutional hybridization. The sociological and organizational literature on new institutionalism (Greenwood and Hinings, 1996) usually appears to assume that organizations are discrete entities, with distinct organizational cultures and normative frameworks. The development of networks and inter-agency partnerships could appear to pose difficulties for notions of organizational boundaries. However, an examination of the data indicates that a number of aspects of new institutionalism have considerable purchase in relation to theorizing networks and partnerships. Templates and frameworks which may be related to professional bodies or norms, equalities or other initiatives, or types of worldview, can straddle or embrace a number of different organizations, providing in some cases the glue that holds governance systems together. The idea of templates, as opposed to different organizations or professional bodies, provides a way of analysing the diffuse, network-based systems that are characteristic of governance. Templates can be used to explain why certain organizations collaborate effectively and others conflict, and the ways in which players act strategically to lock their organizational templates into the dominant frameworks in order to gain resources or influence. The new institutionalist models of conflict and change also appear to have relevance to the field of governance; notions of the loose and tight coupling of templates as a factor affecting change are supported.
by the data. However, the use of new institutionalism in understanding governance must be tempered by the use of other types of analysis, particularly those that more directly address the power dynamics and inequalities that underpin work in this field.

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Notes

1. Overall, 50 per cent of the case-study authorities used the terms ‘lesbian and gay’ at the time of our study; the other half referred either to LGBT (four authorities) or LGB (two authorities). The contentious issue of bisexual and transgender inclusion is discussed by Humphrey (1999) and Monro (2006).
2. The use of a sociological new institutionalist approach is in no way intended to dilute more political, power-oriented approaches (which are provided, for example, by Newman, 2001a and 2001b and Cooper, 1997 — see also Coulson, 2004 in relation to governance and accountability), rather, to augment them by addressing the norms, attitudes, values and rituals that affect organization life. These subjective processes may be important in the sexualities field, given the extent to which certain sexualities are normatively entrenched in local governance work, and the differences between this and the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender subcultures with which local government actors are now engaging.
3. Focusing on the informal norms may lead analysts to overlook the role of formal institutions (Nee and Ingram, 1998). However, at the time of data collection there were few hard drivers for sexualities equality work in place, so that analysis of subjective factors may be especially pertinent.
4. Institutional homophobia was defined by a lesbian community safety officer as involving a lack of openness, respect, equality, policy and practice concerning sexuality, and as people being uncomfortable about sexuality and assuming heterosexuality. The term, ‘homophobia’ was originally coined to mean the irrational fear of homosexuality (Weinberg, 1972), and has now spread to include the social implications of this fear (Llamas and Vila, 1999).
5. It is worth pointing out, however, that a few contributors said that a wider unease concerning any form of sexuality acted to block initiatives concerning LGB equality. In the two authorities where this was evident both homophobic and anti-sex templates were in operation.
6. The term, ‘hard to reach’ was used here to indicate various groups, including lesbian and gay people.
7. Other debates concern, for example, the contrasts between equalities approaches internationally (see Benhabib, 2002).
The issue of power remains pertinent however, and is discussed in the literature, for instance, Powell and DiMaggio (1991) emphasize the power aspects of institutions, arguing that coercive practices limit the variability of norms.

References


Southwark Campaign Against Hate Crimes (2001) Year 2 Delivery Plan. Southwark: Campaign Against Hate Crimes.