

Nanna Mik-Meyer

# Identities and Organizations

## Evaluating the Personality Traits of Clients in two Danish Rehabilitation Organizations

### Summary

This article explores how the guidelines for personality assessments in two Danish rehabilitation organizations influence the actual evaluation of clients. The analysis shows how staff members produce *institutional identities* corresponding to organizational categories, which very often have little or no relevance for the clients evaluated. The goal of the article is to demonstrate how the institutional complex that frames the work of the organizations produces the client types pertaining to that organization. The rehabilitation organizations' local history, legislation, along with the structural features of the labour market and social work result in a number of contradictions that make it difficult to deliver client-centred care. According to the staff, this is one of the most important aims of "good" social work.

### Introduction

Danish rehabilitation organizations are at a crossroads. A highly developed labour market demanding skilled labour and rapidly changing legislation has left these organizations responsible for a group of people they have difficulties in helping. Qualified mainly for unskilled labour, generally in their late forties, and typically suffering from ailments induced by years of poorly paid, physically demanding jobs, it is unlikely that they will ever find steady employment again. They are in danger of being institutionalized in an

important sense. That sense is the theme of this paper.

Sociology stresses the interconnection between institutional features of human service organizations and personal identities; also termed *institutional identities* (e.g. Holstein & Gubrium 2000; Gubrium & Holstein 2001). On this view, welfare organizations have certain common characteristics, regardless of whether their goal is to help unemployed people, battered women, alcoholics or other marginalized groups. An organization of this kind presupposes particular roles and identities and thereby helps formally to produce structural relations between staff and clients (cf. Hacking 1986; Loseke 1989; Miller & Holstein 1991; Holstein 1992; Margolin 1997). Thus, by definition both parties enter asymmetrical institutional relations or what I call "ruling relations" (Smith, 1987; 1990; 2001). "To be a client is, by definition, to be a *person in need*; to be a person in need is also to be a *weak person* (...) clients in the troubled-persons industry are, by definition, people who need something – they wouldn't be clients if they didn't need anything", as Loseke (1999: 160 – emphasis in original) writes. Typically, the natural point of departure for human service organizations is to conceive of the client's problem as an individualized phenomenon, which can be

“engineered” by the organization in one way or another, while conveniently denying the possibility that problems may originate from the structural conditions of social work itself or changes in society like the emergence of unemployment for particular groups.

## Presentation of empirical material

The article explores the institutional complex that unemployed people have to deal with in a Danish setting and analyses how the “documentary reality” of two rehabilitation organizations (cf. Atkinson & Coffey 1997) produce specific client identities. I will show how “key texts co-ordinate the local sites of people’s work” (Smith 2001: 160) producing client identities attached to the institutional complexes with which the categorization process is interweaved (or even produced). Although it is clear that the stated goal of a rehabilitation organization is to help unemployed people become self-supporting or develop a better livelihood, any organization of this kind is nevertheless part of what I call an “institutional complex”, which – as we shall see – restricts or even blinds the staff members in their evaluation of clients.

By focusing on institutional features of client identities I am also contributing to the research in institutional ethnography (cf. Smith 1987; 1990; 2001; 2002). Like the work on institutional identity (Gubrium & Holstein 2000; 2001) institutional ethnography challenges the organizationally produced image of the client as an individual with a problematic essence. Both approaches avoid viewing identities as particularistic individual traits, understanding identities rather as products of social processes embedded in detectable institutional contexts. When one changes the analytical object from individuals and the production of private selves to institutional complexes producing clients (institutional identities) it becomes clear which

social mechanisms result in “natural” categories like e.g., “unmotivated clients”. Even though I focus on the process which leads to the construction of claims about clients – thus producing a constructionist analysis of social problems (Spector & Kitsuse 1987) – I prefer to apply what Best (1993) has termed a “weak” reading of the theory, thus allowing the incorporation of, e.g., statistical data as more or less accurate.

The empirical material presented in this analysis is part of a larger study of the meeting between clients and staff members in two rehabilitation organizations (Mik-Meyer 2004). The organizations are located in fourteen administrative districts in Denmark serving between five and thirty-two municipalities each. I have used various kinds of empirical material, i.e., participant observation notes, interviews<sup>1</sup>, and documentary material. In order to protect the participants’ anonymity I have fictionalized names and places. My choice of two organizations is in accordance with my wish to explore the “reality” of organizations from different perspectives (in this paper, however, I draw exclusively on my interviews with staff and the documentary material of the organiza-

1 All interviews last about one to one and a half hour and have been transcribed. Following Holstein and Gubrium (1997) and Grubrium and Holstein (2002), I consider interviewing an “active” enterprise between two (or more) parties. As noted by the ethnomethodologists already in the 1960s, the production of all meaning is a social phenomenon (Garfinkel 1967), and that goes for interviews as well. Thus, the dialogue of interviewing is not “a pipeline for transmitting knowledge”, but dialogs where meanings are “cooperatively built up, received, interpreted and recorded by the interviewer” (Holstein & Gubrium 1997: 113+119). Since fieldwork enables the researcher to become familiarized with e.g. the specific organizations of everyday life, one of this method’s great advantages is that the “cooperative” quality of the interview preferably tips over in the organization’s (and thus the respondent’s) favour. Participation and observation thus enables the researcher to gain access to *organizationally relevant stories*, rather than simply verifying the *research agenda* (cf. Järvinen [2001] for a critique of research agendas’ influence on interviews).

tions). In organization A, where the length of my fieldwork was three and a half months, I participated on the same terms as the clients. I carried out the activities they did and participated in the various meetings they attended. In this organization I had my “informal” contact with this group. I conducted interviews with ten clients (approximately three interviews with each client) and interviewed eleven staff members employed in various capacities. Being especially interested in the “actionable capacities” of textual material in Smith’s (2001) wording, i.e., how written text influences staff members’ evaluation of clients, I sought and was granted access to all the files of participating clients and other documentary material. I spent a month and a half in organization B, where I “followed” the staff and attended various meetings, workshop activities etc. and had my “informal” contact with this group. I conducted one interview with each of eight clients and interviewed twelve staff members employed in positions that were comparable to the employment structure in organization A. In organization B I was also given access to client files and other documentary material.

The empirical material additionally consists of telephone interviews with one rehabilitation organization in each of the fourteen administrative districts in Denmark. These interviews combined with my fieldwork material show a remarkable coherence in the organization of the work. By “work” I mean the descriptions of clients, the length of their stay, the educational background of staff members, the type of activity and the type of documentary material the organizations receive from the municipalities and produce themselves. On a “formal” level the two organizations in which I conducted fieldwork correspond to the rehabilitation organizations in the other twelve districts in Denmark.

## The goals, activities and institutional complex of the organizations

The goal of Danish rehabilitation organizations is to help clients whose status is ambiguous. Their ambiguous status results from the fact that they occupy a position between the usual organizational categories of the welfare state. This is often because there is a disproportionate relationship between their medical descriptions and their wish to work. In many cases they feel they are too sick to work, but are diagnosed in such a way that they can’t apply for a social pension. Conversely, they want to work, but suffer so many vague pains that neither they nor their supervising caseworker in their municipality has any suggestions as to which job they might be able to handle. A common problem – or common denominator, one might say – is that their medical descriptions do not suggest directions for their supervising caseworker, and thus they become “matters out of place”, as Douglas (1966) aptly puts it. The purpose of the organization is to produce a report providing an image of the individual client that is “action orientated” (a term I borrow from Hanson [1993]) for the supervising caseworker at the municipal level. That way it is possible for her to determine the future economic status of the client: pension, flex job<sup>2</sup>, ordinary job or rehabilitation training. The actual diagnostic process in the organizations involves a wide spectrum of aspects of the clients’ life. Staff members assess the work capabilities of the clients, but also look at their ability to cope with the new situation (unemployment) in their families and more personal and psychological dimensions. The diagnostic process also often implies “moving” the client towards a more “realistic” picture of himself, since it’s a normal assumption

2 Flex job means a job on specific and reduced terms.

among staff members that part of his problems are self-inflicted. Applying this idea, the staff is enabled to “help” the client, and in so doing their practice in the organization corresponds to the dominant discourse of individuality in present-day society (cf. Holstein & Gubrium 2000). The technology at work is “fuzzy”, including sewing baby shoes, playing computer games, working out in the gym, painting silk-screen paintings, cooking meals – as well as more psychological activities like group discussions on personal themes, communication training, talks given by psychologists, or visits from war veterans. The staff members in the organizations consist of caseworkers, psychologists, doctors, physiotherapists and ‘contact persons’, who run the various workshops and act also as personal supervisors for the clients.<sup>3</sup>

A central task for staff members is to create a factual description of the resources and limitations of the clients. This is accomplished after a stay at the organization for three to six months, during which time the clients are observed performing the activities described above. Staff members meet and discuss the progress of individual clients on a weekly basis, and as the stay draws to a close a report of the client is produced (see Buckholdt’s and Gubrium’s [1979] analysis of “staffings”, which provides an illustrative example of this type of meeting).

Legislation has gradually adapted to the growing number of persons receiving pensions during the 1980s and beginning of 1990s and the changing attitudes toward the unemployed. The largest effect came in 1998, when the local municipalities – rather than the state – were required to finance social pensions themselves. Statistics demonstrate that this has had a drastic lowering effect on the amount

of social pensions awarded. Other statistical information indicates that the practices of the municipalities differ enormously, and since the two participating rehabilitation organizations serve eleven and twenty different municipalities respectively, they are confronted with very different institutional units (through the supervising caseworkers in the municipalities). Thus, the “diagnosis” of a client is not necessarily connected to *his or her specific personal situation*, but in many cases rather to the specific *economic policy of his or her municipality*. An analysis of the rehabilitation work must as a consequence relate to these aspects which in De Vault’s and McCoy’s (2002: 752) words are “organized in powerful ways by trans-local social relations that pass through local settings and shape them according to a dynamic of transformation that begins and gathers speed somewhere else”. Consequently I view the meeting between clients and staff as “ruling relations”, a term borrowed from Smith to focus attention on the fact that the complex of organized practices “involve a continual transcription of the local and particular actualities of our lives into abstracted and generalized forms” (Smith 1987: 3). In this transcription, forms of consciousness are created that are properties of an organization or a discourse rather than of individual subjects. Thus, institutions perform the work of ruling; they organize, coordinate, regulate, guide and control human subjects.

This institutional complex influences work conditions at the two rehabilitation organizations. For example, it establishes a rule that it is “good” social work in the organizations to avoid recommending pensions. This condition applies especially for the social workers in the organizations, since they have the daily contact with the supervising caseworkers in the municipality. Contact persons in the organizations deal primarily with clients and are thus – as a result of their organizational position – more focused on the needs of clients (cf. Anspach’s

3 This specific type of welfare organization corresponds more or less to the area of occupational therapy; see e.g. Townsend (1998).

[1987] research on decision-making in different professional groups in a hospital ward).

## Factual knowledge

This section investigates how staff members reach different assessments of clients, i.e., what parameters are used in the evaluation that will eventually lead to the assessments as a form of “factual” knowledge about the situation of the client. Within this perspective facts are not actual events, but in line with Smith’s (1990: 27) work events that have gone through “proper procedure”, which has “transformed them into facts”.

It is this “proper procedure” of Smith’s that I investigate in relation to the different techniques used by the staff members in determining a client’s situation. One contact person, Susan from organization B, focuses attention on this relationship, as evidenced in the following dialogue about the way the reports are made. Please note how Susan’s description shows that many different stories may be told of a person. The specific story she “chooses” depends on a range of factors, not least on observations of the client made by other staff members.

**Susan:** If someone is about to apply for a pension. (...) I have no influence on it whatsoever. But somehow it is important to describe a lot of the physical things they’ve been doing. (...) If it’s someone who’s about to start a flex job (...) then it’s more a case of describing all the resources they have in that area. This means that we are legally obligated to describe all the resources and that’s what I do. But now that you ask specifically, it is changed according to whether they’re entering the labour market, applying for a pension or going into training. (...)

**Interviewer:** How do you make the description (...) if you have a client who would like to get a pension and you think she might as well start a flex job?

**Susan:** Then I describe the resources, which that person (...) has proved to have. Eh...but I prob-

ably also...yes, I think that maybe I write something in between. Because I probably also describe the limitations that person has. (...) [But I] have to write about the resources no matter what. But in order to help the client I also describe their limitations. Otherwise it would be unfair. I mean I have to write what I’ve seen.

**Interviewer:** What I’m really asking is, well, one sees an incredible amount of different things. One could write a novel about each. (Susan agrees). So some sort of selection happens. (...) You emphasise certain things and some things you don’t emphasise. And how do you do that?

**Susan:** Well, how do I do that. (Pause) (Sighs) I don’t know. (...) That’s a hard question. (...) I think it largely depends on (...) what we’ve talked about during contact talks, what’s seemed to be important during the status meetings [a formal talk between the client and a selection of staff working on her case]. (...) My doubt should preferably benefit the client. So it shouldn’t be a case of me making an account that’s coloured by how I think it ought to be.

This dialogue between Susan and me gives an impression of the organizations concerning especially two issues. First, the social worker responds to a general question about her daily evaluation practice by saying “I don’t know... that’s a hard question”, which highlights a central feature of the work in the organization, namely that the activities and evaluation procedures of the staff are embedded and embodied rules of procedures. It is a “bodily knowledge” that operates on a different level than discourses and language (Bourdieu 1997).<sup>4</sup> The focus on the body is thus not only relevant in relation to the *physical* evaluation of the clients in the organizations; also staff

4 It is outside this article’s theme to discuss the thorough methodological implication of Bourdieu’s work on the relation between knowledge and body. I only want to direct attention to the fact that many social workers in my research had difficulties explaining their evaluation procedures through the medium of language. This highlights the importance in applying methods – e.g. participant observation – that can deal with what Bourdieu terms as “bodily knowledge”.



members' reflections of their work are embodied: They often – as Susan does here – find it difficult to articulate their work in words.

Second, her answer shows another general aspect of the organizational life concerning “fact production”. Her description of the evaluation process makes it clear that the procedures she follows when making the final report depend partly upon the purpose of the report (is it to be used in the labour market, in the application for a pension, or in a request for educational support), partly upon the types of activities and goals inherent in the social services legislation. Susan states that she “has to write about the resources no matter what”. She thereby draws attention to the (new) demand for reports which should not aim exclusively for a pension. Immediately afterwards, she points to her specific organizational position, as the one that has to “help the client”, even if this implies describing the limitations of the client: her “doubt should preferably benefit the client”, as she explains. It is evident that Susan is aware of the effect her description may have (even if she says initially, “I have no influence on it whatsoever”), since she chooses to describe the limitations of clients who express a wish for a pension, although she thinks they might be able to handle a flex job. The dialogue in this sense thus illustrates the difficult task of staff members when they finally create those “facts” about the person which they believe will match how a particular client “is”. According to Holstein (1992: 27), despite the apparent factuality of “person descriptions” in human service rhetoric, they will necessarily provide “perspectival, if not partisan, versions of the matters described.” This institutional feature cannot be solved by the staff writing endless stories about clients, where they focus on limitations as well as resources, since “there is always more information that might be provided” (ibid.).

## Textual realities

Silverman (1993) notes that we have entered an “interview society”. It seems equally likely that we have entered a “documentary society”, when we analyse the local practices of human service organizations. Apart from comprehensive records of the clients, the rehabilitation organizations have loads of documents describing methods, evaluation areas (see below), local educational programs, questionnaires, and documents on financial matters. The actual evaluation of clients is based upon written material available to both participating rehabilitation organizations and includes a description of the subjects to be evaluated as well as various methodological reflections. In the following analysis I will present the two organizations' evaluation areas that newcomers (always including staff and sometimes clients too) are presented with in their first encounter with the organization.

Organization A had an outline of the different areas in which they had to evaluate/help the client. These areas included an evaluation of pain level, staying power, pace, working positions (categorized as “physical resources and mobility”); co-operation ability, independence, stress resistance, self-confidence (categorized as “psyche and conflict preparedness”); instruction comprehension, skills, motor functions (categorized as “learning skills, memory and concentration”); problem solving, planning, overall perspective (categorized as “flexibility”); quality assessment of own work (categorized as “performance expectations”); motivation, responsibility, flexibility, attendance and working time (categorized as “work moral”).

In organization B the clients were introduced to figure 1 (see below), containing an overview of the workshops (and a few other activities) as well as information on which areas of their personal situation clients might expect to have evaluated. The purpose of this introduction was to make clients choose ac-

tivities suitable to their particular situation. Clients of this organization did not attend any particular workshop, as they did in organization A, but could join several different ones if they wished. All clients, however, had to participate in group work, training and relaxation exercises.

Figure 1 shows that the specific evaluation of subjects also departs from a very corporal sense of the body (e.g. “state of tension”, “body coordination”, “body awareness” etc.). Even though the focus in this article is primarily on how textual material creates specific client identities, it is important to notice that

Figure 1: Overview of institution B's workshops combined with evaluation areas

Workshop/ Clarification of (evaluation of)	Computer workshop	Textile work- shop <sup>5</sup>	Kitchen and diet	Group work	Training	Relax- ation	Swim- ing
Working positions (standing, walking and/or sitting)	X	X	X			X	
Learning ability	X						
Instruction comprehension	X		X		X		
Carefulness	X	X					
Concentration	X	X	X				
Staying power	X	X	X				X
Creativity	X	X					
Memory	X				X		
Independence	X	X	X		X		
Office work abilities	X						
Skills		X	X				
Fine motor function		X					
Co-operation ability			X	X			
Need for aid			X				
Ability to new thinking				X			
Body sense					X	X	X
Planning ability					X		X
Body challenge inclination					X		
Work ethics					X		
Body coordination					X		
Body awareness						X	
State of tensions						X	
Stability							X

5 Apart from the 8 areas listed here, further evaluation is carried out in regards to precision, sewing skills, quality assessment, work pace, motivation, self-awareness and the ability to cope with time pressure and retain an overall perspective on things (see analysis in an upcoming section).

we are once more introduced to an empirical set of materials that a pure linguistic approach would not be able to grasp fully. Also, a comparison of the evaluation areas from organization A and B shows that a number of the same concepts are used. In fact, if concepts such as B's "ability to plan" is sided with A's "planning and overall perspective" it turns out that only a few areas do not correlate. Similarly B's concept of "work ethic" is the equivalent of A's "work moral". Further, a number of concepts are identical, e.g. "work position", staying power, instruction-comprehension, memory, learning ability, concentration, co-operation and independence". As Smiths notes (2001) "texts creates action" and has – as we shall see – in this case the profound effect of transforming organizational categories into specific personality traits of persons. In this process, *institutional selves* (Gubrium & Holstein 2001) are made stable. So, despite a dominating goal among social workers to interact with "the whole person", persons are transformed into cases (cf. Hummel 1977).<sup>6</sup>

The different assessment areas can be divided into two main groups: 1) Personal capacities of clients and 2) Physical capacities of clients. Many of the personal assessment areas – e.g. co-operation ability, learning ability, independence, self-confidence, initiative and flexibility – are popular terms in present Western society. Nikolas Rose (2000) and Mitchell Dean (2001) show that our present neo-liberal society not only focuses on, e.g., the individual's choice, but also on the idea that an individual is a "manipulable man", i.e., a subject that is capable of being modified by its environment (Dean 2001: 57). Rose and Dean are interested in how society "represents itself" as a "manner of doing things"

(Dean 2001:58). Within this perspective one can view the range of different assessment areas from the two rehabilitation organizations as the organizations' way of trying to "manipulate" their participants. The citizen in this Foucauldian perspective becomes a person who wants to free himself (Rose 2000: 166), i.e., in this case a citizen who should *want* to become independent, self-confident, take initiative and to learn (just to mention some of the assessment areas from the two rehabilitation centres). It is thus an individual who should positively engage in a development of his or her personal self, since this development is the core value of advanced liberal societies, as Rose (2000) and Dean (2001) emphasize. Since organizational values cannot be separated from dominating values in present society (Smith 2002), we can expect that clients are also perceived as a group of people who should strive for a development of their personal selves in order for them to "*fulfil themselves as free individuals*" as Rose (2000: 166, emphasizing in original) puts it. Brian, a sub-manager in organization A, presents his organization's tie to uncontested values in the present labour market very clearly:

**Brian:** The firms are very focused on the personal aspects today. (...) It's a fact that if people have been sitting at home, have been isolated, and then they act differently. I mean, they actually loose the social competence of being with other people. And what is in demand today is the *personal aspect*; that people can get along with you, that you function well socially, and whether you can take an initiative. (...) So that is what we have to work on here in the organization.

It is the "personal aspect" that is in "demand" today, as Brian explains. In doing so he associates the assessment areas of the client's "social competence" and "initiative" with a feature of the present-day labour market, i.e., an institutional feature transformed into a central personality trait worth measuring. The per-

6 Besides many of the authors I refer to, a number of classical studies from the 1960s and 1970s have focused on this process, e.g. Goffman (1961), Hasenfeld & English (1974), Prottas (1979), Lipsky (1980).



sonal assessment areas of the organizations are also an integral part of what Rose (1999) calls the “psy discipline” reflecting that the prime task of the organizations’ work is to *diagnose* individuals, in this way documenting the unequal access to the production of knowledge (Smith 1987) for staff and clients. These two conditions – established values in present Western society and the diagnostic practice of “psy disciplines” – might explain why the “personal” assessment areas have become so obvious to evaluate in these organizations. The physical assessments areas – e.g., staying power, pace, working positions and motor functions – might be viewed as a “remnant” from an industrial era in the 1950s where the rehabilitation organizations were developed. Although the monotonous unskilled work that was in demand then has more or less disappeared in many Western countries including Denmark, the group targeted by the rehabilitation organizations has remained the same: that is, mainly unemployed, unskilled labour. This creates a fundamental “disjuncture” (a term I borrow from Smith [1987]) for the staff for two reasons: 1) There is no demand for the qualifications (present or lacking) of the unemployed persons referred to the organization and 2) The evaluation areas’ primary correspondence to an organizational “reality” contradicts important goals for the staff – as mentioned on many occasions during my research – that is to deliver client-centred care and engage in an equal relationship with the client. These goals are also on a general level central in social work (cf. Margolin 1997; Corring & Cook 1999).

In the following analysis I will focus on the productive effect of the evaluation areas as presented above and attempt to demonstrate their “hyper-reality” (cf. Hanson 1993), i.e., the sense in which they dominate other understandings. I want to show how these organizational categories produce specific client identities that reveal the organization’s tex-

tual reality (and history). Even though I place texts centrally in the analysis, I do not wish to reduce the interaction between staff and clients to text. Their function as “fundamental media of co-ordinating people’s work activities” (Smith 2001: 175) becomes perceptible only when I combine the textual material with interview and observational material<sup>7</sup> (cf. my discussion about “bodily knowledge”).

## Staff members construction of client identities

### Example 1

In the following I present an extract from a focus group interview with three contact persons – Sally, Jacob and Peter – from Organization A. The purpose of their evaluation is to enable the “system” to take action, i.e., *determine* a situation which calls for action. Despite the staff members’ wish to capture the individuality and uniqueness of the clients, notice how the organizational categories serve as guidelines for the staff when they talk about their evaluation (Peter explicitly refers to the documented evaluation areas of his organization). The discussion started with a question about how they concretely evaluate the clients.

**Sally** (works in a computer workshop): Now, of course my starting point is the computers. (...) A lot of the older people who come here are a bit scared of computers. From that I can see whether they’re able to learn new things. (...) and [I can see whether they have] initiative to carry on with things, too. (...)

**Peter** (works at the assembly workshop): [We can see] whether they’re able to meet on time. Co-operate with others. And whether they can behave well...social exercise. Besides that we have a long list (...) : initiative, work approach, skills. [Refers to his organization’s assessment

<sup>7</sup> See Miller’s (1997) discussion on the advantage of combining a textual analysis with ethnographic observational material.

areas] (...) It could be, say, to make a doll's pram. Then you give a verbal instruction. "You need to mark it up here, and then you have to cut it and if you run into problems ask this and that person". Then you've already made a task description and then you can check whether he understands the instructions. Can he carry it out? Does he stay and finish the job or is he off chatting somewhere instead? (...) It ties up with initiative, because if they get stuck if we're in a meeting, and nothing more happens that day. Then that's poor initiative.

In the discussion above we see an example of how staff members use organizational categories to structure how they evaluate clients. They focus on clients' learning abilities, memory, independence, concentration, initiative, co-operation and behaviour in a general sense (Peter's concept of "social exercise"). This example demonstrates the actionable capacities – even determining capacities – of texts acquiring constitutive status in the evaluation process.

The staff members' statements thus demonstrate that the institutional complex with which their work is interweaved creates an evaluation process that corresponds to organizational categories. This process is with Pence's word (2001: 213) "circular" in the sense that the category determines which features of any given personality is relevant for them to focus on, and thus in turn makes the report "effective in terms of the code". In using the organizational categories as "viewing categories", the social workers – despite their wish to capture the essential, private selves of clients – firmly establish institutional identities in terms of the textual reality of the organizations in question.

**Example 2**

The next example concerns staff members from organization B, who were asked how they evaluated clients. The dialogue with Ellen, who manages the computer workshop,

is typical of the subjects that cropped up during our discussion of clients. Ellen is talking about Marie, a client who gradually "recognizes" her problems:

**Ellen:** Marie came to see me because she wanted to make a table on the computer. So I showed her the easiest kind to see just what she's like. (...) Let her sit and try it out for a bit. (...) Then I thought she was being quite lazy. She called me over all the time. (...) And as I see it that means she somewhat lacks the ability to concentrate in depth. (...) So we [Ellen and her colleagues] talked to Marie about it (...) and she recognized those couple of examples. And agreed: "I'll try and get better at that". (...) I said to her: "You call me over too quickly. I think you can do more things than you put across". (...) "Memory" is evaluated the same way actually. Are the same questions asked? It's also "instruction comprehension". (Pause) I will definitely evaluate her "creativity". She makes this table – what is it like? Did she manage anything new?" (...) Can she influence it. (...). [At little against norms, I said to her]: "Well, I think it could be a bit nicer". So she played around with different borders and background colours and those things. (...) I think that it's fine that she plays around with it".

As in the example from organization A, we are confronted here once more with a staff member who creates a profile of a client according to the organizational categories. Thus in effect making personality traits like "instruction comprehension, level of concentration, memory and creativity" central features describing Marie.

It is a bit unusual for the workshop manager to present the assessments of a client to her while she is being evaluated, but Ellen mentions that she and her colleagues "talk to her about" her lack of "ability to go into depth" or her "impatience" (not presented in the extract) and later Ellen suggests that Marie put a bit more work into the table to make it "nicer". This is also unusual. The fact that Ellen intervenes in the evaluation situation is probably due to a perception of Marie as less gifted, which makes the staff members see it as their

responsibility to help her along a bit more than the others. The reason why this intervention can be perceived as only somewhat unusual is that staff members regularly present clients with assessments during the evaluation so that they may assess whether the clients are developing during their stay, i.e., whether they “acknowledge” the assessment; in fact, this is the typical way to measure development. Clients who refuse to change their view are perceived as being in denial, as Loseke (1999) also found in her work. This is an illustrative example of a central feature of social work: the asymmetrical structure of ruling relations, which automatically defines interactions between staff and clients.

Ellen notices that it “is fine that she [Marie] plays around with it [the table]”. By this she means that Marie shows an interest in the activities in the computer workshop and that in this sense she co-operates with Ellen. From my discussions with staff about the clients’ personal development (and observations of the daily interactions) I found that co-operation is a central feature of client personality that is evaluated in the organizations, and it has a great influence on the overall assessment. Co-operation relates to the organizational goal of determining clients’ development potential. The clients should be willing to engage in a personal development process and be willing to perceive their situation in accordance with the staffs’ assessments (thereby reproducing the unequal status between clients and staff). The demand for co-operation is according to Margolin (1997) and Loseke (1999) reflected in social work *per se* and is closely tied up with the dominant feature of neo-liberal societies: to engage in a personal development process in order to free one-self (Rose 1999, 2000).

## The ruling relation orienting the meeting between staff and clients

One workshop in organization B carried out evaluations based on assignments that were documented in writing. In order to give an example of how the staff assessed the different evaluation areas, I will briefly outline the activities used for measuring, e.g., motivation, independence, and precision. In the upcoming analysis I will, however, mainly focus on the ruling relation that orients the meeting between staff and clients, which is – as we shall see – documented in the written assignments.

The workshop in question is a textile workshop from where I have reproduced one typical assignment. The clients who decided to join the textile workshop were given the assignments as they went along, and were evaluated – and evaluated themselves – while they performed the assignments. Typically the staff member would observe the clients while pretending to be engaged in similar activities in the workshop. The purpose of this concealed way of evaluating clients was, according to the staff, to avoid distracting the clients by their observations. In many cases the staff member at some point intervened and “helped” the clients’ in their assessment. This “help” might be viewed as a practice to ensure harmony with the organizations’ textual reality. Below an example of an assignment on the textile workshop:

### **Bib**

The purpose of this assignment is to evaluate your approach to monotonous but physically demanding work. This gives you, *and us*, the opportunity to assess your motivation, staying power and pace. [The client is then asked to state his or her working pace, breaks, time spent on the assignment and physical state while doing the assignment].

Viewing the assignment it appears that an important aspect of the evaluation is to define

the specific conditions of the assessment *and* to test the client's self-awareness. Notice how the text explains that the purpose of the assignment is "to give you, *and us*, the opportunity to assess...". This is mentioned in all assignments. In the case of Marie, described by Ellen earlier, the assignments provided the staff with an impression different from what they had learned from speaking with her. This is an illustrative example of the asymmetrical positions human service organizations provide for clients and staff, i.e. the dominant relation orientating the encounter between the two. This institutional aspect makes it difficult – or even impossible – to deliver "client-centred" case work or it provides a different understanding of what "client-centred" means. The problem, it would seem, is that many clients have not yet "realized" their situation and may be reluctant to "admit" it. Diana, who is contact person in organization A and runs the textile workshop, engages in the following dialogue with me, when we begin to talk about the assessment of Marie's skills. The following quote from Diana is an answer to the question of whether Diana can evaluate Marie just from talking to her (instead of assessing Marie while she does specific activities like sewing a bib):

**Diana:** (Pause) I don't think so. Because I don't think Marie really wants to admit it. She has a hard time recognizing that this is how it is. She's very much the type who goes, "Oh no, it's so boring". (...) But in fact that's what she's best at. (...) She probably wants to give a different image of herself because she doesn't really want to face the fact that this is how it is. But she's obviously more satisfied now when she does the work. I mean, I can tell that she's more like, "Great, now I can do it" and that's positive, isn't it? So maybe she'll eventually recognize that it's good for her to do these things.

As we see from the dialogue a central part of Diana's task is to work with false self-perception: to make Marie "recognize" her situation in accordance with the staff. The specific as-

signments showed that Marie was "a person lacking in confidence", as Diana wrote in her report about Marie, although she could carry out the tasks under close supervision. And it was revealed that she used her criticism of monotonous work (being boring) to cover the fact that she was not very good at anything and consequently had to resign herself to monotonous work in the future. This knowledge provided staff members with an opportunity to work on Marie's false self-perception, the result being, according to Diana, that her self-esteem improved thanks to the small victory of mastering basic tasks. The example shows how institutional features of social work – staff members' undisputedly knowledgeable position – produce the hyper-reality of organizational categories.

## The productivity of organizational categories

In this final section of the article I shall analyse a report on a client in order to illustrate how the organizational categories create what Campbell (2001) calls a "textual object". The final reports on clients in both organizations are structured in a similar way: they contain statements made by the contact person, caseworker and in most cases a doctor, a physiotherapist and/or a psychologist as well. This combination of staff provides a pretty good picture of the "proper procedures" of the work (cf. Smith 1990). Since the purpose is to examine the situation of a client as defined by the physical (doctors and physiotherapists), the psychological (psychologists) and the social aspects (contact persons who focus on the "whole" client and caseworkers who combine all the information), the combination of staff and the structure of the report seem logical from a diagnostic perspective.

I have chosen to present a report on Benny from organization A, since his report exemplifies many of the relevant analytical features

of the eighteen participating clients' reports. I have emphasized the organizational categories as well as other evaluation areas described to me by the staff members in interviews. The purpose is – once again – to show the ways in which organizational categories determine Benny's identity. I have chosen a report on a client with a longer educational background than most other clients. This makes it possible to show how the organizational categories (corresponding also to the industrial era that gave rise to this specific type of organization) result in a description of Benny that is totally at odds with his capabilities. The organizational categories determine which "facts" about Benny are produced, even if they do not necessarily determine the conclusions drawn about him.

Benny is forty years old. He has participated in a number of courses and has had different types of jobs for short periods. He is trained in computer science but has only worked in this field for one month. In the summer of 1999 he was diagnosed with a serious disease in the connective tissue and has been receiving health benefits ever since.

### **Benny's report**

In the workshop report Benny is described as a person who has had (and still has) a number of psychological problems. He is described as a "loner" who seems to have "lacked challenging interaction with a spouse or other equals" and as a result has developed "low self-esteem". Benny is "quiet and withdrawn" and typically becomes "uncomfortable, nervous and irritable" during conversations. Since he started seeing a psychologist, however, the contact person notes a "pronounced improvement". Benny has started to "accept" his difficult situation and "has gained more self-awareness". This psychological description establishes Benny as a client who has begun to interpret his situation according to organizational categories. This makes Benny a co-operating cli-

ent, as the following description of his physical/moral condition shows:<sup>8</sup>

Benny started his work evaluation with a small assignment, i.e., photocopying approx. 200 A4 pages on our photocopier. Afterwards he had to sort them and make 4 binders with teaching material. As is always the case with Benny, there are no problems in terms of instruction-comprehension, concentration, planning, overall perspective and the like. He certainly doesn't have intellectual problems. In the exercise mentioned Benny had problems simply using a puncher. He got pains in his fingers and arms. Walking approximately 100 meters from the photocopier and back made him a bit short of breath. (...) Instead Benny was asked to assemble a wine shelf. Physically an easy task, but with demands in regards to good concentration and overall perspective. The assignment involved the drilling of 44 holes of 33 mm diameter each with a small drill. Handling the weight of the machine (1 kg) alone caused him pain. It was not possible to measure the time of the actual drilling. The problem was the same: no intellectual problems but great pains in joints in fingers and arms. Afterwards Benny's knees and hands were in pain. After this assignment, Benny was given the task of assembling a feeding board. He had to glue the parts together. But Benny said right away that he was not capable of pressing the glue out of the tube. So the glue was poured in a bowl and Benny could now do the gluing using a small brush. Still Benny worked at a very slow pace. He complained about pains in his joints. Pressing the wood parts together with a pressure less than 100 gram provoked pain. (...) Despite a sensible resource administration his joint pains started again. (...) Finally Benny has several times helped a participant in our jewellery workshop with jewellery prints. (...) Socially a nice gesture to do for another participant. In his excitement about contributing to a special piece of jewellery, Benny worked on forming and braiding silver rings using small tongs. This provoked great pains and Benny had to stay at home the next day.

8 I have chosen to provide an elaborate review of Benny's physical/moral condition (omitting descriptions of his psychological condition), because I want to provide the reader with an impression of the wealth of detail characteristic of workshop descriptions generally.



Despite the somewhat gloomy description of Benny's physical resources, it is stated in the short conclusion by the social worker at the organization that:

Benny possesses a number of resources valued on the labour market, such as good intellectual resources, good at getting an overall perspective and planning, able to take the initiative. He has good abilities for acquiring new skills, and he is a good communicator. (...) If Benny is granted time and flexibility in a relevant company, combined with continued psychological treatment, it is considered realistic to hope that he might find employment on the labour market, despite his physical problems.

In a telephone conversation conducted a year after Benny had left the organization, he explained that the supervising caseworker at his municipality had provided him with a flex job, which he had been doing for four hours a day ever since. He worked at a school teaching IT and education. The best part of his stay at the rehabilitation organization, he said, was that he had started seeing a psychologist. He had known from the beginning that he would never be able to do factory work, which, in his view, was the only kind of work the organization was able to evaluate (note that the description of Benny is based on manual tasks only).

It is hardly necessary to point out that the image of Benny is formed according to organizational categories. I have highlighted these in order to show how the "personal" description transforms Benny into a textual object. It should be noted that even though Benny's description emphasizes the things he is incapable of doing physically – and this should be seen in the light of the fact that he was evaluated in a workshop where the majority of clients ended up with pensions – he is one of three clients from my project in organization A who found a flex job. This is a paradox, since Benny's workshop description has obvious "pension-traits" and thus corresponds perfectly to the organizational precondition

that this specific assembly workshop should primarily diagnose clients perceived as very sick.

Depressing as it may be, the description of Benny's physical condition does not carry much institutional weight since it concludes with a recommendation that he should be employed on the labour market, even emphasizing his resources in a positive way. This paradox can be explained in terms of the organization's activities and responsibilities and the different positions and tasks of the social workers and contact persons towards the municipality and the needs of the client, respectively. In Benny's municipality "no more pensions were awarded" as the social worker in the organization explained, which is why a conclusion aiming at pension "would be of no use for him", as she explained. Benny expressed pain many times doing the activities in the workshop, which might relate to his conviction that he would not be able to do this kind of work for a living. This condition might explain the restrictive and negative portrait of Benny (he could not press glue out of a tube etc.) made by his contact person. Even though the picture is at odds with Benny's capabilities it corresponds to Benny's lack of preference for a job that involves primarily manual tasks. The portrait of Benny, however wrong it may be, can be seen as the contact persons way of "helping" Benny now that the departure is manual tasks. That way the picture confirms the contact persons organizational position as the one that should "help" Benny without challenging the activities at the workshop – his organization's textual reality.

The analysis of the paradox also needs to include Benny's good will towards staff members, which is emphasized several times. The point is that co-operative clients, i.e., clients who want to engage in a personal development, those who show up and show interest in the organization's work are not perceived as being in "denial", which gives them an oppor-

tunity to influence the work in the organization (at least the final description). In this case the staff members are dealing with a client who has “acknowledged” his situation. Benny continuously expressed an interest in finding a job in IT or teaching and an interest in the work of the organization. So even though these wishes challenge the activities in the organizations (since they could only assess manual tasks) they are reproduced in the final conclusion. That way Benny’s cooperativeness, i.e. his ability to “acknowledge” his situation – becomes another important condition to include in an analysis on the organizations effect on clients’ possibilities.

Benny’s case (as well as the staff members’ statement in the previous sections) demonstrates the inherent sociality of facts (cf. Smith 1990; Potter 1996). In his case it is illustrated that “facts” are created in a complex institutional process including the organization’s textual reality (interweaved with the organization’s goals, activities, “target group” and “assumed” labour market), structural features of social work (Benny as co-operative), present legislation and labour market etc. My analysis has thus shown that interaction in organizations always involves at least three parties: client, staff, and text – which, as Campbell (2001: 243) notes, constitute “a particular sort of relation”. It is a relation, which demands very special resources from the client (for instance a willingness to co-operate like Benny with the organization although the work there might seem useless), if his wishes for a future life are to influence the dialogue with the organizational reality.

## Concluding remarks

Danish rehabilitation organizations are caught between a developed labour market demanding skilled labour and municipalities trying to cope with a rapidly changing legislation. Over the last decade, the municipalities have

become financially responsible for social security pensions and a group of clients, mostly unskilled labour, generally in their late forties and typically suffering from various ailments induced by years of low wage, physically demanding jobs. This kind of institutional complex severely restricts staff in their interaction with clients. So, despite the fact that most staff members in interviews mention empowerment strategies (also documented by Townsend [1998]) and their ability to deliver “client-centred” case-work (equally documented by Campbell [2001]), their practice abounds in examples of the institutional complex that blocks their view in the evaluation of clients. Despite every “good intention” to the contrary they are involved in the production of institutional identities corresponding to organizational categories that very often have little or no relevance for the clients evaluated.

Three areas in particular illustrated similarities in the participating clients’ reports, as reflected in the organizational categories guiding the view of clients. They were: learning potential, resource administration, and flexibility/initiative (as in Benny’s report). If knowledge is a social accomplishment (cf. Smith 1987) and thus cannot be separated from the hegemonic discourse of societies, the thesis that learning ability, self-understanding and independence/flexibility are three central features of present-day Western societies would seem to be confirmed. We are thus dealing with an individual that (should) want to free him- or herself (Rose 2000, Dean 2001) by developing personally within the above mentioned areas. As far as the physical evaluation of clients is concerned, as evidenced in all reports, it is apparent that the industrial era in which these specific organizations were developed has influenced the process of evaluation profoundly. In those days it may have been reasonable to evaluate pace, motor function, staying power, etc. But today, when this organizational, historically produced “logic” is more or less ir-

relevant, these activities in the rehabilitation organizations become highly “exotic”, since the current (Western) labour market has no need for such skills.

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