



Seminar

WENDY N. ESPELAND

Fellow, SCAS.

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*The History of 10%:
Measures of Sexual Behavior and the
Gay Rights Movement in the U.S.*

Tuesday, 25 September, 11:15 a.m.

In the Thunberg Lecture Hall
SCAS, Linneanum, Thunbergsvägen 2, Uppsala
www.swedishcollegium.se

S W E D I S H
C O L L E G I U M
for ADVANCED STUDY

ABOUT WENDY N. ESPELAND

Wendy Espeland received her PhD in Sociology from the University of Chicago. She works in the fields of culture, organizations, law, and knowledge production, with an emphasis on quantification and accountability. She has written about the effects of quantification on indigenous populations (*The Struggle for Water: Politics, Rationality, and Identity in the American Southwest*) and, with Michael Sauder, on the effects of university rankings on higher education. She is also conducting research, with Stuart Michaels, on the relationship between measures of sexual behavior and the gay rights movement. Her articles have appeared in the *American Journal of Sociology*, the *American Sociological Review*, *Law & Society Review*, the *Annual Review of Sociology*, the *European Journal of Sociology*, and the *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*. She has received fellowships from the Russell Sage Foundation, the Australian National University, the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, and the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin.

While at SCAS she will be working on a book that examines commensuration—the transformation of qualities into quantities—in four cases from different historical and institutional contexts: double-entry bookkeeping, how measures of sexual identity shaped the gay rights movement in the United States, creating a market for air pollution, and the development of visual aesthetics in the representation of quantitative information.

ABSTRACT

My talk is a biography of a number. I investigate how 10% became the conventional estimate of the proportion of homosexuals in the U.S. for about 25 years. Beginning with Alfred Kinsey's pioneering work on sexual behavior in the late 1940s and early 1950s, 10% evolved from one of many numbers describing sex between men to a taken for granted fact that persisted until the advent of the AIDS epidemic in the late 1980s. Efforts to measure sexual behavior played a crucial role in the development of the modern gay rights movement and gay identity politics. Measures of sexual practice and people's critique and interpretation of these measures shaped how participants in an emerging gay political movement understood themselves, how and when they organized, and the political strategies they and their opponents adopted.