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Figurational Sociology and the Sociology of Sport

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Abstract

This article provides an outline of the development of the figurational sociological analysis of sport. It begins by reviewing the careers of Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning. It shows how their early work established and embodied many of the core principles of figurational sociology - the concept of figuration; the importance of process; recognition of the fundamental interdependence of macro-level and micro-level social developments; and the importance of undertaking an embodied sociological analysis – and had a major impact on both the work of Elias and the development of the sociology of sport. It then explores the growth of figurational sociology of sport, explaining how research and pedagogical developments through the 1980s and 1990s continued to impact on the subdiscipline. Thirdly it charts how the core theoretical principles have been applied and developed in my own work, in particular the analysis of violence, Englishness and national identity in relation to cricket, and more recently in an attempt to understand the growing synergy between sport, health and medicine. The article concludes by identifying how recent ‘state of the art’ reviews of the field continually show the centrality and significance of Elias, Dunning and the figurational approach to sport they together developed.

My aim in this article is to provide an outline of the development of figurational sociology and explore how its core ideas have influenced the development of the sociology of sport. I want to do this by firstly reviewing the careers of Norbert Elias, the individual whose ideas are often seen as synonymous with figurational sociology; and Eric Dunning, who worked closely with Elias and who can rightly be considered a founding father of the sociology of sport (Waddington and Malcolm 2006). In the second part of the paper I explore how these theoretical influences continue to evolve, specifically through my own research, gaining greater theoretical precision as they are applied and tested in our dynamic social world.

Elias, Dunning and the Sociology of Sport

Norbert Elias was born in 1897 in Breslau, Germany, of Jewish descent. Being from a relative affluent family he was able to access a German classical education during his early years. After fighting on Germany's Western Front during the First World War, Elias resumed his education and concurrently studied medicine and philosophy at Breslau University. In 1933 he wrote *The Court Society* while working as an assistant to Karl Mannheim at the University of Frankfurt but, due to the emerging political situation, went into exile travelling first to Switzerland and then France as he sought a teaching position. He finally migrated to England in 1935 and through frequent visits to the Reading Room of the British Library began the research which led to the 1939 publication of *Über den Prozess der Zivilization* (later translated into English as *The Civilizing Process*). Elias gained his first teaching position (aged 57) at the University of Leicester in 1954 and he remained resident in England until 1978 (Velija and Malcolm 2018; see also Dunning 1992; Dunning and Hughes 2013).

Whilst at Leicester, Elias met Eric Dunning. Significantly, Dunning met with Elias to discuss the topic of his forthcoming postgraduate study (Malcolm and Waddington 2020). Eric had just completed his undergraduate sociology degree but had also studied German whilst at school so was able to read Elias's (2000) most important text, *The Civilizing Process*, which was only available in German at the time.

Eric was a keen sportsman, and he first asked Elias whether football would be a respectable field for research. It is testimony to Elias's open-mindedness and characteristic of his broader sociological imagination that, at the conclusion of that meeting, Eric left Elias's office to begin an initial literature review. It was a decision which, probably unknown to Dunning at the time, followed Elias's advocacy of choosing research topics in which one is already deeply immersed and personally familiar. Eric found very little research on sport that drew on sociological concepts and theories but persevered regardless. He would later ask if Elias thought football might be a good example of the social processes outlined in *The Civilising Process*, and it is from here that their joint journey into the sociology of sport would begin.

Following that meeting in Elias's office the development of figurational sociology and the development of the sociology of sport would become – to use an important figurational term – radically interdependent (Dunning and Hughes 2013). This was initially evident across both the organisational basis and theoretical premises of a

subdiscipline which was then emerging out of the previously separate fields of physical education and sociology.

Organizationally, the emergence of the sociology of sport coincided with the start of Eric's academic career. Eric's first publication on the development of football appeared in 1963 (Dunning 1963), and in 1964 a meeting was held in Geneva that led to the formation of the International Committee for the Sociology of Sport (or ICSS, the forerunner of today's International Sociology of Sport Association or ISSA). The Committee met for the first time in Warsaw in 1965 and held its first international symposium in Cologne in 1966 (Malcolm 2012, 2014).

Dunning and Elias both attended the 1966 Cologne symposium (Coakley and Dunning 2000). The young Dunning must have made quite an impression in Cologne, combining his natural sociability, his intellectual enthusiasm and his capacity to speak German, for the outcomes of this international symposium included the publication of Dunning's (1967) 'Notes on some conceptual and theoretical problems in the sociology of sport' in just the second volume of the *International Review of Sport Sociology* or IRSS, and a plan to host a subsequent ICSS symposium in Leicester in 1968. While Eric never held office in the ICSS, he would become an associate editor of the journal and subsequent Presidents of ISSA – notably Joseph Maguire and Elizabeth Pike – would be very much influenced by his work.

1966 is also a significant year in terms of theoretical development, because it marks the publication of Elias and Dunning's first co-authored work; 'Dynamics of sports groups with special reference to football' published in the *British Journal of Sociology* (Elias and Dunning, 1966). At this point Elias had clearly become convinced of the significance of studying sport both for its own sake and for adding nuance to his broader sociological model. The collaboration between Elias and Dunning proved highly important both in terms of establishing a critical mass of research output, but particularly in developing key theoretical tools and concepts for the emerging study of sport.

A year later Elias and Dunning presented the first iteration of the 'Quest for Excitement' at the British Sociological Association annual conference, and in 1971 Dunning's edited collection, *The Sociology of Sport*, was published (Dunning, 1971).

This book included a joint work with Elias on football in medieval England plus Elias's essay 'The genesis of sport as a sociological problem'. It was also around this time that Elias wrote 'An essay on sport and violence', an article of considerable theoretical significance which later appeared in their joint book, *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process* (Elias and Dunning, 1986). Testimony to the influence of these ideas, *Quest for Excitement* has been published in many languages including, of course, Japanese.

Within these works we can see four of the five core principles of the figurational approach (see Malcolm 2015 for a further discussion).

1. In the 'Dynamics of Sport Groups' paper, Elias and Dunning (1966) sought to illustrate the usefulness of Elias's concept of figuration. The notion of figuration was developed to show the interdependence of the agency of individual players and the structures (of the game) within which they must act, the dynamic tension between conflict and cooperation or the enabling and constraining character of all social relations, and the importance of always recognising both the intended and unintended consequences of purposive human actions. In so doing, this article sketches a distinctly figurational framework for understanding power as interdependence. It would be a further 12 years and the publication of *What is Sociology?* before Elias (1978) would explicitly develop these concepts again/further.
2. In Eric's research on the development of football (Dunning 1963; Elias and Dunning 1971; Dunning and Sheard 1979), and in Elias' (1971) analysis of sport in Ancient Greece and Rome, we see the emphasis on the importance of process. The figurational approach effectively fuses the boundaries of history and sociology – and hence Elias sometimes used the terms developmental or process sociology. He favoured research which explored changes across multiple generations, but where this is not possible, sought to emphasize social change rather than providing snapshots of time.
3. In Elias' (1986) 'An essay on sport and violence', we see the principle of linking macro and micro social processes, and what Elias (2000) called sociogenesis and psychogenesis. While in one sense this study focuses on the development of the rules of foxhunting, Elias shows how the relatively local level changes that led to the development of a specific set of 'sport' rules

– a process he called sportization - was linked to a parallel national level political process that he called parliamentarization. As both processes - the initial codification of modern sports and the development of modern parliamentary democracy - involve negotiations over the way social conflict is resolved, they can be seen as indicative of a change at the level of human personality or habitus. The study therefore also explains why modern sport developed in this particular form, in this particular place, and at this particular point in time.

4. In 'Quest for Excitement' Elias and Dunning (1986) emphasise the importance of understanding the embodied experience of social life. Their essay addresses one of the most fundamental questions facing sociologists of sport: why does sport hold such social significance in contemporary societies? In answering this question they show that we must consider the interaction between social processes and bodily sensations such as excitement, adrenaline, fatigue, and physical pain. The development of sport not only shows how important these bodily sensations are, it shows that they are historically variable and thus developed through social relations.
5. The fifth core principle – understanding the role of knowledge – is not particularly evident in Elias's work on sport at this time. He had, already, published his foundational essay on Involvement and Detachment (Elias 1956), and in the late 1960s and early 1970s would publish articles explicitly on the sociology of knowledge (Elias 1974) and related ideas, such as the power of professions, the development of science (Elias 1972) and his community study, *The established and the outsiders* (Elias and Scotson 1965). Thus, while knowledge was part of Elias's thinking at this time, as I go on to show, these ideas would only become more evident in the figurational sociology of sport at a later point in time.

Elias left England in 1978 and even though he and Dunning were to publish *Quest for Excitement* in 1986, this migration effectively sees the end of Elias's empirical study of sport. More broadly however it should be recognised that this collaborative work on sport holds a highly distinctive place within Elias's extensive catalogue of publications. For while Elias kept writing into his 90s, he only ever once, collaborated with any other author (John Scotson). Moreover, prior to working with Dunning, Elias

had published just 2 articles in English. Looking back it is easy to think that Elias's intellectual impact was somehow destined to happen, but in the early to mid-1960s when Elias and Dunning first came together, his career was uncertain and none of the subsequent developments were inevitable. At the very least, Dunning boosted Elias's visibility in English-speaking sociology, but it would perhaps also be reasonable to say that he provided an important springboard for the development of Elias's broader career.

Figurational Sociology of Sport 'after' Elias

In one respect the timing of Elias's move to the Netherlands is unfortunate, for it coincided with what in many ways was the beginning of a golden age for figurational studies of sport. First Dunning collaborated with Kenneth Sheard to publish a seminal study of the development of association and rugby football, *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players* (Dunning and Sheard 1979). Second, alongside Patrick Murphy and John Williams, Eric Dunning led a research team that published three books on football hooliganism (Williams et al., 1984; Dunning et al., 1989; Murphy et al., 1991). These works had a huge impact for it led to the identification of a theoretically distinct body of work – labelled the 'Leicester School' - which was the dominant academic voice and public face of sociologists of sport in the UK for many years (Bariner 2008). Their final book, *Football on Trial*, reflects the fact that what is now one of the most globally significant domestic sports leagues - the English Premier League - faced the threat of extinction in the 1980s due to public concerns about football hooliganism (Murphy et al. 1991).

The football hooliganism research provided the impetus for the development of the figurational sociology of sport in two key ways. First Eric Dunning, (with Patrick Murphy and Ivan Waddington) established a postgraduate course. I applied to start this course in just its third year. I was invited for an interview and, in preparation, read parts of his edited *The Sociology of Sport* (Dunning 1971) and the first of the football hooliganism trilogy, *Hooligan's Abroad* (Williams et al. 1984). I may have read some of the figurational contributions, but I certainly didn't recognise their distinctive approach. However, I *will* always remember the subsequent interview which began with Eric asking me whether Margaret Thatcher was right to say that

there is no such thing as society, just individuals and families. This felt like a trick question; a sociologist of sport asking a potential student if a controversial and distinctly right-wing politician who wanted to ban professional football was right. Of course, I disagreed giving examples of the many ways in which the actions of humans are shaped by their mutual orientations to others. Eric then corrected me. I was wrong but for the right reasons. While humans influence each other's behaviour the notion of 'society' – in contrast to the concept of figuration – tends to reify humans as acting like collective wholes and thus obscures the power balances and thus tensions that constitute the dynamic basis of social life. Margaret Thatcher was right (society as a conceptual construct that constrains as well as enables our understanding), but for the wrong reasons (i.e. she exaggerated the extent to which individualism shaped human life). Eric, of course, was right and for all the right reasons. This was my first introduction to the idea of figuration, to figurational sociology and to Eric Dunning. Moreover, this postgraduate degree course, onto which I subsequently enrolled, was to provide the educational foundation for many future UK sociologists of sport. I cannot begin to list the people who were taught but it is perhaps remarkable that even the 2021 NASSS President - Rob Lake – studied at the centre and subsequently published work on civilising processes in the development of tennis (Lake 2009).

Second, the impact of the football hooliganism work enabled the 1993 establishment of the Centre for Research into Sport and Society (CRSS). This research centre added further impetus to the developing scope of figurational sociological scholarship on sport. Sheard (1997) published work on the role of violence in the development of boxing. Waddington (2000) developed work on the use of performance enhancing drugs and the growing health and sport agenda. Eric's reputation as a globally leading scholar also attracted many overseas visitors. The first long term visitor was Professor Kiku, who for a few months was also joined by Professor Ebishima. Others came from Korea, Denmark, Norway and New Zealand. Peter Donnelly and Kevin Young were among the many others who made shorter but often frequent visits, presenting their research to a critical but appreciative audience. However, the other enduring contribution which the CRSS made to the sociology of sport was in developing a postgraduate distance learning version of the sociology of sport masters. Thus, we can trace a clear lineage between Dunning et

al.'s work on football hooliganism, the development of the sociology of sport in UK, and the subsequent critical mass of scholars in the field.

Figurational Sociology of Sport: next generations

The establishment of the CRSS also had a major impact on me personally. Having completed the postgraduate course I began work as a junior researcher. I never embarked on a doctoral study because there simply wasn't time. But this position did give me a chance to prolong my sociology of sport education, and the opportunity to meet many leading international scholars. Briefly I even occupied the office in which Elias had studied and from which (it is said) his unpublished book manuscript on the development of gender relations in Ancient Greece and Rome (see Elias 1987) was consigned to the bin by an over-enthusiastic cleaner. Most of all I had the opportunity to listen to Eric and others talk about sport sociologically in classes where we co-taught, over coffee, during lunch and (of course) whilst drinking beer.

My early research was inspired by the figurational tradition of undertaking historical or developmental analyses. In my first publication (Malcolm 1997) I used figurational sociology to explain the pattern of stacking within cricket; that is the way different minority ethnic groups occupy different roles or playing positions in team sports. Starting with the seminal work of Loy and Elvogue (1970), this kind of study was common in North American sociology of sport at the time, but mine was the first such study to be historically or processually-oriented; explaining contemporary race relations through: 1) the history of working and upper class relations in the English game, and 2) the diversity of social relations that characterised British imperialism. It was a developmental explanation rooted in conceptions of power, recognising the importance of the intersections of race and social class. The paper built on, illustrated and applied the concepts of interdependence, power and process discussed above, as well as Elias' work on established-outsider relations. It also responded to contemporary social debates about cricket, race, identity and belonging in the England and led my research to be featured on the front page of *The Sunday Times*, and to be discussed in the US journal, *Foreign Policy*.

Subsequently my interest turned to the issues of violence in the historical development of cricket (Malcolm 2002). This research still holds a special status for

me because I know that, in Eric's eyes, this is when I became a 'proper' sociologist. The article was titled 'Cricket and Civilizing processes: A response to Stokvis' and stemmed from the critique of figural sociology posed by Ruud Stokvis (1992), who argued that existing figural studies were too limited in their focus on violence and its control. Stokvis had cited cricket – a sport that involves no contact between players - as an example of a sport to which figural sociology would not apply. To test this hypothesis, I undertook a review of the development of cricket and I focussed in particular on the development of the rules by which cricket is played. Dunning was noticeably and genuinely impressed when he read a first draft of the article and very graciously included a reprint in two subsequent books he co-edited; one on the sociology of sport (Dunning and Malcolm 2003), and one on figural sociology (Dunning and Mennell 2003). An interesting debate with sport historians followed (e.g. Malcolm 2008).

In the context of this article, my research on cricket demonstrated two key points. First it showed that Elias was right to link sportization and parliamentarization for, once again, the same group of people who were involved in the development of modern parliamentary democracy were also involved in the initial codification of cricket. Second, the research showed that even in a non-contact sport such as cricket, the control of violence was a central developmental influence. Tracing how these rules change over time I showed that in the most fundamental parts of the game change occurred, not necessarily *because of*, but certainly with *reference to*, the control of violence. It is a point of pride for me that while UK sport historians have continually published work challenging figural sociological analyses of the development of association and rugby football, 20 years on my original thesis remains effectively unchallenged.

This work on cricket would ultimately come to form my doctorate – a doctorate through published work. While I had countered Stokvis's specific critique of figural sociology, I recognised the broader point that the development of sport cannot and should not be reduced to violence. Indeed the expression of violence is itself a manifestation of a deeper underlying change to the way humans think – of the fifth and least developed of Elias' core concepts, knowledge. So while in subsequent work I showed how debates about violence shaped some of the most significant rule developments through the twentieth century, other work on cricket combined a

sensitivity to the role of violence, with notions of race, national identity and, in particular, Englishness. Above all other sports, cricket was and is central to the way English people imagine themselves (and so define others). As is the case with the self-identities of all relatively powerful groups, the English consider themselves in largely positive terms – governed by reason rather than emotion, peaceable rather than violent, open and inclusive rather than closed and territorial (Malcolm 2013). Cricket provides a useful forum for examining how the self-identities of the English are challenged through postcolonialism (Malcolm et al. 2010). These projected identities were fraught with contradictions but they revealed how the English struggle to maintain a positive self-image which defines their notion of being civilised (Malcolm 2021).

From 2000 I began to develop a second strand of research. Empirically very separate, but conceptually closely aligned, this research focussed on health and medicine in sport. The catalyst for this work was Kenneth Sheard with whom I initially worked on a project that looked at pain and injury in rugby union. There were clear links here to violence and its control and thus it built on Elias' central theory of civilising processes. We chose rugby because we had both played the sport, and because we recognised that while historically declining, levels of violence in rugby exceeded that evident in all but combat sports. Other influences were Ivan Waddington, who brought a background in the sociology of medicine to his study of pain and injury in football (Waddington et al. 2001; Roderick et al. 2000) and Kevin Young (2004), who as part of his regular visits to Leicester, shared with us his important research and opened our eyes to developments in the sociology of the body.

There were, initially, three strands to this work that were distinctively informed by figurational sociology. First, by triangulating interviews with players, coaches and medical staff we could more firmly locate these injury experiences within a figuration of social relations (Malcolm 2006). Second, because we studied the game in the period when it had just turned professional change were particularly rapid and pronounced, and so we could reveal how the structural influences of commercialisation processes impacted on the embodied experiences of pain and injury (Malcolm and Sheard 2002). Third, we began to develop a role for the sociology of knowledge, exploring how the specific social conditions of practicing

medicine in sport shaped firstly the authority which medical staff exercised, and secondly what *they themselves came to believe* about particular injuries (Malcolm 2011).

The intersections of these three ideas was best illustrated through a study of the management of concussion or brain injuries in sport (Malcolm 2009). Where the policies designed to protect players' health were negotiated in an environment where medical scientific knowledge clashed with the beliefs of those embedded in the sports subculture. The broader power relations of elite sport, combined with the lack of certainty science could provide, created an outcome whereby medical staff effectively abandoned their medical training as they developed ideas that provided greater existential security.

In studying the interconnections between sport, medicine and health I have explored the development of sports-specific medical specialisms, the development of physical activity health policy, the injury experiences of both elite and grassroots sporting populations, and the use of physical activity amongst clinical populations (Malcolm 2017). What we see is both a medicalization of sport (where all forms of sport become increasingly oriented around medical conceptions of health and increasingly dependent on the allied health professions) and a sportization of medicine (where physical activity becomes more centrally implanted in the holistic management of human health).

Here we see the convergence of ideas about interdependence, process, embodiment, macro and micro social change and knowledge. However, in developing this work I have become increasingly aware of one of the fundamental challenges of working with Elias' ideas; namely that the various concepts cannot be easily compartmentalised, but are actually '*radically* relational' (Dunning and Hughes 2013). In an attempt to capture this, a recent paper I have co-written (Gibson and Malcolm 2020), considers how sport, medicine and health might be theorized to more properly capture the potential and promise of Elias' ideas. In this paper we argue that:

- 1) Contemporary manifestations of health have emerged as part of the lengthening of social interdependencies in more complex societies. For

example, the economic challenges of public health systems stem from the fundamental interdependence of human health.

- 2) Contemporary trends in health and physical activity stem from the trajectory of embodied social regulation which underpins Elias's notion of the civilizing process. Rationalistic forethought has come to play a greater role in the presentation of our physical selves, and leads to the creation of new forms of what we define as the 'civilized body'.
- 3) The social value ascribed to physical activity should be understood according to the principles of Elias's sociology of knowledge, for here we see NOT the compelling weight of evidence-based medicine, but a commingling of scientific evidence and emotional appeal which draws together a range of key players (politicians, medical professions, and the public) to form a powerful lobby.
- 4) Our use of physical activity to manage human health also relates to the embodied experience of being active or being overweight in contemporary societies. Being and feeling healthy involves an alignment between dominant social values and physiological sensations.

My main research priority for the next few years is to develop my earlier work on concussion (Malcolm 2020). This is not only a major and growing social issue, it is an issue about which sociologists of sport are currently too silent. Some sociologists have sought to become more actively involved in public campaigns, particularly around the cessation of some forms of bodily contact and would perhaps even advocate the abolition of sporting institutions like the NFL. Following Elias I believe that sociologists should first seek to understand such social issues, and then seek to change on the basis of the distinct insight that our disciplinary perspective can bring. Specifically, I think this work will: 1) place contemporary developments in historical context; 2) highlight the social relations specific to sport which lead to a high level of resistance to policies designed to protect participants from harm; 3) Understand the shifting power balance between the sports medicine and public health lobbies, the former largely seeking to ensure continuity in sports practice and the latter seeking to minimise potential harms; 4) Illustrate the interdependence between these sport-specific concerns and what is going on in the broader world of health and healthcare, particularly the moral panic around the economic and social costs that dementia

could entail, fuelled by current limitations in the treatment of dementia. Perhaps most simply, current concerns largely stem from earlier rule changes that have seen more extreme forms of harm – such as deaths, spinal cord injuries, etc. – considerably reduced. But they are also linked to the misleading ideologies and expectations we hold that sports practices are essentially and universally good for health; the belief that participation is fundamental to our children's development, and the lack of recognition of the fundamental harms that elite sports people experience. This is one of the most exciting emerging research areas in the sociology of sport.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by returning to the significance of figurational sociology and the legacy of Elias and Dunning. In recent years a number of scoping studies mapping the sociology of sport have been produced. Frequently these refer to the prominence of certain authors, works and/or theories. Such overviews repeatedly evidence how figurational sociology has become one of the most prominent paradigms in the sociology of sport. In the first of these to be published, *Sport and Sociology* (Malcolm 2012), I presented the results of a review of all the content published in the leading 3 journals in the field: *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* (JSSI), *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* (IRSS), *Sociology of Sport Journal* (SSJ). This review (up to March 2011) showed that Elias is the most cited individual theorist in both the IRSS and SSJ. Similarly, Dart (2014), reviewed 25 years of the content of these same three journals, and found that while Bourdieu and Foucault were the two leading theorists globally, Bourdieu and Elias were the two most prominent theorists cited in the IRSS.

More recently Tian and Wise's (2020) comparison of publishing trends in Europe and North America, shows a similar pattern. Specifically, analysis of these same journals (2008-2018), shows that Bourdieu and Elias and Dunning again vie against each other as the most cited theorists. Additionally, Gomes et al.'s (2021) review of the content of the *Journal of the Latin American Socio-cultural Studies of Sport* revealed that of 91 papers published from 2011–2018 (53 in Portuguese, 33 in Spanish, and five in English). Bourdieu and Elias were the two main cited theorists (71 and 48

respectively). By every metric available, the collaboration of Dunning and Elias has had an enormous impact on the field.

Much of this impact relates to the inspiration and innovation of Eric Dunning. Much of it also relates to the receptiveness of Elias and his interest in developing a wide-ranging theoretical paradigm which could be applied to and tested across the whole spectrum of human experience. For me, the joy of working within this framework is that it is continually evolving and shedding light on new problems, but it's enduring contribution to the sociology of sport fundamentally lies in the ability to provide a set of tools for understanding human societies that consistently work in the crucible of experience and enable us to improve our social worlds.

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