Norbert Elias and the Body

Mike Atkinson

Introduction

Norbert Elias would have probably loathed the very title of this chapter. Referring to bodies, emotions, or social relationships as a discrete or singular entity would have been unthinkable. Any neophyte figurationalist is well aware of Elias’ disdain for analytic dualisms, reductions and static descriptions, and at the top of his list would be the separation between body and self (and I might add, society). Even the rise in prominence of the sociology of ‘the body’ or the academic study of embodiment as a specialist field might have seemed as bizarre to Elias as it might have to Georg Simmel, Erving Goffman, Max Weber, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, or Mary Douglas; or, any theorist of embodiment interested in how socio-historical processes and cultural relationships are inscribed on/in/through bodies. And indeed, Elias clearly had larger theoretical fish to fry than ‘the body’ per se. Like many other socio-cultural researchers attentive to matters corporeal, Elias viewed the body as a barometer of social relationships and long-term historical processes. To this end, his work is peppered with rather mainstream sociological concerns regarding power, identity, agency, collective behaviour, emotions and knowledge. But Norbert Elias’s precise contribution to the contemporary study of bodies and embodiment is debated considerably to this day.

Elias’s work pertaining to embodiment rests between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Elias’ work was not discovered *en masse* by European and North American sociologists until the 1970s. Elias completed the main structure of *The Civilising Process* in 1939 (a book setting the tone for his take on body research within the social sciences), but it would not be widely received until its (re)print in English in 1978 – problematically, a time when a range of action, process-oriented, macro/micro synthesizing, interpretive, network, phenomenological, interactionist/constructionist, feminist and other theories had claimed the body as an important subject of inquiry. At an historical moment when sociologists were turning toward variants of social constructionism, post-structuralism, or theories attempting to reconcile false heuristic gaps between bodies, individuals and societies, the discovery of Elias in the final quarter of the twentieth century could not have been more poorly timed (Quilley and Loyal, 2004). Elias’s work became much overlooked during the 1980s and 1990s renaissance in body research as it offered, according to a swathe of critics, very little innovative thought on matters corporeal (van Krieken, 1998). Additionally, sociologists occasionally dismiss Elias’s work as research that kicks at already opened theoretical doors (i.e. themes of power as analysed by Karl Marx and Max Weber, interdependence as articulated by Émile Durkheim, embodied social performance as documented by Georg Simmel, Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault,
and emotions as analysed by Herbert Blumer, Arlie Hochschild or E. O. Wilson). Further still, among many who dabble with Eliasian theory, his statements on civilising processes, power, and bodies are regularly misread, caricatured or dismissed as neo-Darwinist, social evolutionist and regressively functionalist.

The reception of Elias’s theoretical concepts and constructs is further complicated by the twists, turns and peculiarities of his own career. Elias was born in Breslau on 22 June 1897, the only son of Hermann and Sophie Elias. At the distinguished Johannes gymnasium in Breslau he received a first-class education in science, mathematics, classics, languages and literature. On leaving school in 1916 he served in the German military, mainly on the Western Front, during in the First World War. He later enrolled at Breslau University in both philosophy and medicine; completing the pre-clinical part of his medical training before concentrating on philosophy for his doctorate. He wrote his DPhil thesis (Idee und Individuum: Ein Beitrag zur Philosophie der Geschichte [‘Idea and Individual: A Contribution to the Philosophy of History’]) in Breslau under the direction of the neo-Kantian philosopher Richard Höningwald.

Elias received his degree in 1924, then worked with Alfred Weber in Heidelberg in 1925 and eventually travelled with Karl Mannheim to Frankfurt as an academic assistant in Sociology. There, he worked on Die Höfische Gesellschaft [The Court Society] until fleeing Germany 1933 following the National Socialists’ accession to power. Elias, as a Jew, went into exile in Paris for two years, eventually moving to London in 1935. In both Paris and London, Elias worked on Über den Prosess der Zivilisation [The Civilising Process], completing it in 1939 (it was published in Switzerland). Without an academic position (he would not obtain his first university post in Sociology until 1954, at the University of Leicester) and therefore academic audience for his work, his thoughts regarding bodies, societies and historical processes remained in relative obscurity. Without a formal, permanent position in a university, Elias wrote little but continued to ponder the sociological lines of analysis he laid down in Über den Prosess der Zivilisation.

While Elias eventually published over a dozen books including The Established and the Outsiders (with John Scotson; Elias and Scotson, 1965), What is Sociology? (Elias, 1978b), The Loneliness of the Dying (Elias, 1985), Involvement and Detachment (Elias, 1987a), and The Society of Individuals (Elias, 1991), dozens of original articles and a litany of chapters, his thought remains, to this day, almost exclusively referenced for his insight on manners, emotional restraints and the social control of violence (qua the civilising process). Although Elias’ thoughts about bodies in The Civilising Process – and those across the full spectrum of his work – are applicable to the widest range of sociological sub-disciplines, figurational theory is perhaps most consistently applied and debated within the sociology of sport (Dunning, 1999). While Elias is often lauded for his penetrating insight on how bodies reveal civilising trends across geographic contexts by sociologists of sport and others, the depth or full thrust of his work on embodiment is yet to be explored. The categorisation of Elias as a theorist of the civilising process and his long-term association with a relatively marginalised sociological sub-discipline like sport and leisure has done little to engender academic curiosity about his theories and concepts. To date, then, figurational concepts and lines of analysis have yet to make their distinctive or indelible mark on body theory.

### Process, Figurations and Civilising Trends

In searching for a representative summation of Elias’s work on bodies (a tough task to say the least), we might first commence with his core interest in processes. In arguing against the process-reductionist and static way of envisioning entities in social theory, Elias prefers to examine bodies, relationships and lived experiences as wholly processual. Long before Shilling’s (1993) lauded description of bodies as constantly becoming in social life, Elias (1978a, 1978b) argued the body must be understood as open and malleable; or in other words, we must study people as homines aperti rather than homo clausus. Elias’s emphasis on the primacy of process in sociological analysis is appropriately summed by Goudsblom (Sociology in the Balance; Goudsblom, 1977: 105):
1. That sociology is about people in the plural – human beings who are interdependent with each other in a variety of ways, and whose lives [including their bodies] evolve in and are significantly shaped by the social figurations they form together;

2. That these figurations [like bodies] are continually in flux, undergoing changes of many kinds – some rapid and ephemeral, others slower but perhaps more lasting;

3. That the long-term developments taking place in human figurations [and bodies] have been and continue to be largely unplanned and unforeseen; and,

4. That the development of human knowledge [including embodied knowledge] takes place within human figurations, and is one important aspect of their overall development.

Let us extend the above emphasis on embodied processes by further considering two of Elias’s core concepts: figurations and civilising processes. In the first instance, Elias’s concept of a figuration has impacted global sociological thinking and theorising rather moderately. In the second instance, Elias’s (1978a) articulation of the civilising process receives as much praise as it does criticism. A detailed analysis of the subtle essences and nuances of Eliasian theory is beyond the scope of this chapter, but suffice to say both concepts are perhaps more relevant today then they have ever been in avant garde thought pertaining on embodiment in late modern societies.

Elias describes a figuration as a complex web of social relationships based on individual and group interdependencies, such as a family, a school, a workplace, a community, an economy or a political sphere. He uses the term in lieu of traditional concepts such as society, institution, subculture and other terms connoting human action as statically structured rather than processual. Elias (1978a) suggests that individuals’ activities (including any of those pertaining to corporeality) are best understood as products of mutual (but not necessarily equal) relationships:

The network of interdependencies among human beings is what binds them together. Such interdependencies are the nexus of what is here called the figuration, a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people. Since people are more or less dependent on each other, first by nature and then by social learning, through education, socialisation, and socially generated reciprocal needs, they exist, one might venture to say, only as pluralities, only in figurations.

(p. 214)

The above description of a figuration is well worn within Eliasian-inspired research; and indeed, this small excerpt contains several meta-narrative concepts underpinning his thinking about bodies and society such as interdependence, mutual orientation, and I-WE relationships (or pronoun-based modes of identification more broadly).

Elias’ analytic construction of the civilising process is relatively straightforward, but complex and brilliant along many lines. Over the course of history, Elias documents, Western nations like France, Germany, and England became increasingly dense in terms of their respective social divisions of labour and corresponding interdependencies shared by people therein. These demographic shifts occurred and were arguably facilitated within emerging nations headed by central ruling authorities that ‘owned’ the legitimate means of violence and economic taxation. Elias (1978a) describes these structural and social transformations, combined with the parliamentarisation of conflict, as unintended sociogenic changes. Here is where Elias’ interest in many of the classic sociological questions (such as the nature of social organisation, the relationship between the individual and society, and how social change occurs) is revealed. Elias studies the body as a marker of social processes: namely, process of social and then internal, personal self-regulation reflective of shifting social relationships (interdependencies) between people.

As history unfolds in increasingly pacified and deeply interdependent (functionally democratic and differentiated) social spaces, people become more attuned to the needs and thoughts of others. As heightened
emotional control and impression management become practised over time as matter of public ritual, collective psychologies are affected such that self-restraint crystallised as established cultural norm. The embedding of (or perhaps more accurately, the switching on of the human capacity for) an impetus toward self-restraint in the collective cultural psyche is described by Elias (1978a) as a central psychogenic change.

Elias’ (1978a) study of long-term civilising processes, then, consists of an extended exposition of sociogenesis and broad-scale figurational dynamics. If sociogenesis refers to the ongoing and fluid structuring of relationships of interdependence among/across groups of people and how social structuring processes are the organisational patterns of social life, figurational sociologists commence research on forms of body behaviour, movement, ritual, treatment, modification, and representation by analysing how corporeal ideologies are formed and transformed through ongoing sociogenic processes (Mennell, 1989, 2007; Salumets, 2001). Elias’ (1978a, 1985, 1991, 1996) own analyses of the body as a text of sociogenic and psychogenic change articulates how shifts in cultural orientations toward the body and its display are largely, but not exclusively, contoured by prevailing social interdependencies between people (Kemple, 2001). For figurationalists, integrated analyses of sociogenesis, psychogenesis, and social interdependence lead to nuanced understandings of how social, cultural and biological factors interweave. Elias argues that ‘the structures of the body and human psyche, the structures of human society, and the structures of human history are indissolubly complementary and can only be studied in conjunction with each other. They do not exist and move in reality with the degree of isolation assumed by current body research. They form, with other structures, the subject matter of a single human science’ (Elias, 1991: 36). As a result, social scientists must analyse the tissues of interdependency connecting individuals in social figurations (e.g. family, school, peers, leisure, and work relations) and the anticipated or unanticipated impact of these connections on personality structures.

Van Krieken further captures the importance of simultaneously studying interdependency, figurations, sociogenesis, and psychogenesis:

The structure of human life could only be understood if human beings were conceptualised as interdependent rather than autonomous, comprising what he [Elias] calls figurations rather than social systems or structures, and as characterised by socially specific forms of habitus, or personality-structure. He emphasised seeing human beings in the plural rather than the singular, as part of collectivities, of groups and networks, and stressed that their very identity as unique individuals only existed within and through those networks of figurations.

(Van Krieken, 1998: 55)

Through his study of sociogenesis and psychogenesis, Elias ultimately describes personality structures as socially learned second natures or habituses, and suggests that through ongoing socialisation processes individuals learn seemingly taken-for-granted ways (i.e. habits) of experiencing, utilising and interpreting bodies. Elias’ (1978a, 1987b, 1991) exposition on the habitus formation process outlines how one’s conceptions of corporeality are incorporated into everyday physical habits such as wearing clothing, eating behaviours, sexual displays, the expression of emotion and body modification:

The make-up, the social habitus of individuals, forms as it were, the soil from which grow the personal characteristics through which an individual differs from other members of his society. In this way something grows out of the common language which the individual shares with others and which is certainly a component of his social habitus – a more or less individual style, what might be called an unmistakable individual handwriting that grows out of the social script.

(Elias, 1991: 63)

Few sociologists of the body might quarrel with Eliasian connections between body dispositions, tastes, preferences and performances with both historical change and present conditions of social existence.
Indeed, Bourdieu’s (1984) much later expositions of habitus — strikingly similar to Elias’s — would help him to become an influential sociologist of embodiment during the late 1980s.

For me, what is especially frustrating, disappointing and curious about Elias’s reception and use in Western sociological circles is the collective over-emphasis on matters civilising in his work. The Eliasian conceptualisation of the civilising process is regularly conflated with figurational theory or figurationalist approaches in total. The Civilising Process (Elias, 1978a) is but one case study Elias documents in his illustration of how bodies, emotions, groups, cultures and nation-states develop interdependently over time (Quilley and Loyal, 2004). Rather than categorising Elias as a theorist of the civilising process (and therefore reading Elias’s understanding of bodies as highly contained (rationalised) entities, it is more accurate to represent his earliest tome in the figurationalist library as a first step in articulating the importance of thinking processually about life (including, of course, bodies) in social figurations. Again, such thinking underscores the importance of viewing bodies in ‘open’ terms. While Elias’s classification as a theorist of the socially civilised, restrained, rational and instrumental body is tempting (Shilling, 2003), an innovative and productive use of figurational theory might commence with a full analysis of what Elias ‘really’ introduces and unpacks regarding bodies in The Civilising Process: the hinge.

The Hinge

What makes Elias’s approach to the study of bodies distinct from many others in the sociology of the body pantheon is neither its emphasis on the historically contextual nor socially constructed body, but rather its coupling of the culturally contoured and intextuated body with the so-called ‘natural’ body (Elias, 1987b; Maguire, 1993). Sociologists frequently struggle with the place of biology, human instincts, drives, or genotypic and phenotypic natures in social theory on embodiment. Perhaps this is an enduring ideological hangover produced from Herbert Spencer’s nineteenth-century attempts to write and portray sociology as a form of social Darwinism, or the program of post-functionalist (and post-positivist) sociology more broadly. Elias, by contrast, initiated a program of inquiry and stream of theory starting in The Civilising Process that envisions how the physical body and its potentialities are interwoven into social history (and, indeed, vice versa) in learned, unlearned, and predominantly unplanned manners.

To grasp Elias’s notion of the hinge, we might first examine how his conception of power as it stands as the basis of his introduction to study of bodies and embodiment in society. When I first read The Civilising Process as a graduate student of sociology, I understood it as a text centrally concerned with social processes of power and control; and how bodies are framed by and partially frame social realities of power. As someone studying the upsurge in radical (aesthetic) body modification practices in Canada, I appreciated Elias’s keen understanding of how bodies may be read as empirical indicators of shifting conditions of social control, order and power. I then read What is Sociology? (Elias, 1978b), delving deeper into his thoughts on how the regulation of ‘bodies’ illustrates something important about the essence of human figurations (i.e. the complex interplay between raw physical bodies, sociogenesis and psychogenesis). In What is Sociology?, Elias outlines three basic social controls that are interwoven into figurational power dynamics — an analysis of the final of these three controls would be a major focus in Elias’s early, and later, work on embodiment. For Elias (1978b), members of social figurations enact power and control:

1. over nature through technological advancements;
2. over groups of individuals through institutional processes; and,
3. over drives and desires through learned mechanisms of self-restraint.

Elias argues in The Civilising Process that the collective history of Western nations reveals a common tendency for complex groups of densely interdependent agents to rely upon the third source of social control over the long term. That is, while Court-centred monarchies and then nation-states relied upon
the threat of physical force as a main tool of control over citizenries (an explicit form of governmental bio-
power), the course of civilising processes paves the way (unintentionally) for the development of self-
restraint as the dominant social control mechanism (that is, discipline via self-surveillance). Long before
Foucault (1977) ostensibly altered the course of social scientific thinking on the regulation of bodies and
subiectivities and societies via mechanisms of social power and discourse, Elias charted much of the terrain.
Indeed, the history of social power, discipline and punishment illustrates how aggressiveness and psy-
chological/affective orientations were transformed as complex social institutions took form. In such a the-
oretical meta-narrative, struggles for power and control in figurational life progress from hand-to-hand
combat to symbolic power plays between people for knowledge, authority and physical distinction enacted
across institutional fields (Elias, 1978a, 1996). Elias illustrates, for example, in The Germans (Elias, 1996) that
as physical violence becomes less pervasive in social life and inner restraint increases in importance as a
means of revealing one’s distinction (qua power) to others, the institutional control of productive forces
and knowledge dissemination becomes critical.
Elias’s construction of the hinge is buried somewhat deep in his analysis of power, interdependence and
emotions. Those who reference The Civilising Process as his definitive analysis of power–bodies–emotions as
interwoven processes, frequently overlook Elias’s more mature and reflexive statements on the trinity; or in
other words, we routinely miss Elias’s developed conceptualisation of the hinge first outlined in The Civili-
sing Process. Elias’s fullest statement on the hinge is found in his essay, ‘On Human Beings and Their
My understanding of embodiment shifted markedly following my first reading of Elias’ (1987b) lengthy
analysis. At its core, his discussion of the hinge presents an entwined relationship between learned and
unlearned human knowledge, habits, behaviours, emotions and modalities of embodiment. Elias (1987b)
points out that what distinguishes human beings from other animals is not our complex cultures, scaffold-
ing of social structures or the advanced modes of technologisation framing our lives. Nor is it our ability to
speak using diverse symbolism. All of these are indeed markers of human life and passed on as learned
knowledge across generations. These elements of life are the social soil out of which selves grow. But what
is especially unique about humans is that we possess the genetic and corporeal soil, if you will, that allows
us to relate cognitively and emotionally with one another. Our learned knowledge is only made possible
by unlearned human traits, characteristics or biological hardware (The Symbol Theory; Elias, 1989). The
symbol emancipation Elias (1989) describes as a vital part of the steering of human behaviour and thought
by learned knowledge (Elias notes as a distinctive feature of human group life the triumph of learned over
unlearned knowledge) is a product of our innate, unlearned structures of the mouth, vocal chamber and
lungs. Yet further still, humans still carry other unlearned dispositions and instincts that partly inform our
social behaviours; these are, if you will, forms of pre-conscious body knowledge. Over the course of many,
many centuries, human behaviour became steer behaviours less on unlearned knowledge and more by
learned knowledge. Elias writes:

The dominance of learned over unlearned characteristics in humans provides a biological framework
for a social development which can occur without any biological changes, that is to say, independently
of the process of evolution. The two concepts refer to processes which are different in kind … Some
people present social development in the monastic manner as part of the unitary biological process.
Others, dualistically, present biological evolution on the one hand and social development under the
name of history on the other as totally distinct and totally isolated from each other, without giving any
thought at all to the problem of the hinge, to the question of their connection with each other. What
I have tried to do here is just that: I have intended to indicate the nature of the hinge … The bio-
logical dominance gained by learned forms of conduct links irreversible evolution to reversible
development. Learned knowledge can be forgotten … All aspects of what is called human person-
ality – all aspects of the overall organisation of a person’s experiences, attitudes, and conduct in
relation to self and non-self persons and objects – are derived from the intimate merging of unlearned and learned processes.

(Elias, 1987b: 350–51)

The linchpin of Elias’s argument is that as social life becomes more populous, interdependent, patterned, organised and predictable, the contexts of our knowledge accumulation and deployment change. Unlearned human knowledge and realities influence how we organise our social lives, and the social organisation of life awakens human potentialities for learning. There is, then, a recursive relationship between the physical, psychological/cognitive/affective and the social. The need to protect the human body, to nourish it, to reproduce, to defend and protect it from others (biological realities and body knowledge perpetuating action) certainly motivated the formation of our earliest figurations and shifted our earliest personality structures. But with the widening of social groups and the need to communicate and align collective behaviour (and cultures) stimulates the human’s natural abilities for speech and brain-enabled creativity for speech.

The Civilising Process is a treatise on the hinge, a case study illustrating how self-restraint is partially an unlearned human drive or possibility, but also forged in relation to and in the context of a changing, more interdependent, pacified, centralised, and functionally democratic environments. Each of the two processes emerges out of and in relation to previous collective habituses and forms of social organisation. To this end, the book is the first of Elias’s descriptions of the complex interplay between the unlearned and learned aspects of human emotions and behaviours. Over the course of the past 40 years, sociologists in particular have frequently reduced Elias’s (1978a) analysis to its socio-historical aspects, allowing for a continued undervaluing of his emphasis on biology and psychology in The Civilising Process and elsewhere.

A final word about Elias’s construction of the hinge and (em)bodied agency is worthwhile. Critics of Eliasian theory, including Lyon and Barbalet (2003), maintain the highly civilised and rationalised body Elias illustrates is one exclusively written or tamed by the social. Drives are muted or trumped by culture and self-restraint is the ultimate reflection of a body shackled by interdependency chains. There are, of course, alternative readings of Eliasian thought on embodied agency or, the body’s ‘resiliency’ in the face of long-term socialising trends and symbol emancipation processes. A radical view of figurational theory sees the hinge as an expression of the possibility of bodies directing the course of social change; or, at least partly charting the course (albeit in unplanned and unintended ways) of human history. Here, and many figurationalists may disagree, Elias’s thinking is similar to Latour’s (1993, 2005) portrayal of body agency in actor-networks; specifically Latour’s principle of generalised symmetry between actants. Whereas theoretically lazy readings of the civilising process of the hinge produce understandings of bodies as overly socialised, a closer inspection of figurational theory reveals Elias’s firm grasp on bodies as actant – an understanding outlined in The Civilising Process but perhaps most poignantly illustrated in The Loneliness of the Dying. The social conditions of late modernity may produce isolation and alienation for the dying person and one’s cultural location provides one with a set of habituated emotional matrices for feeling and knowing the dying process, but one can hardly discount the degree to which the unlearned, unreflexive biological body is an actant in the performance of death.

Applications of ‘Embodied’ Figurational Theory

The under-appreciation of Elias as a complex, multi-disciplinary theorist of embodiment is perhaps no better illustrated than through a brief review of the mainstay subjects to which figurational theory is applied. Even in figurational studies of the body, the tendency is to lean heavily toward the sociological and historical aspects of Elias’s work. One might argue, as Shilling (1993) and Williams and Bendelow (1999) contend, that even Elias himself did not fully explore the biological-psychological aspects of embodiment as exposed in his writing on the hinge. Yet, as Quilley (2010) points out, this is only a surface level understanding of Elias’s
interest in evolutionary biology and matters biophysical, as evidenced in The Symbol Theory and other texts. As Elias (1987a, 1987b) clearly wrote, because social life is so complexly organised through and by interwoven physical, psychological and socio-cultural processes, scientific knowledge of the social must be as equally multidisciplinary and conceptually dense.

i. Civilising and decivilising processes

Without reiterating the above discussions regarding the civilising process, the lion’s share of extant research on embodiment from a figurational perspective revolves around civilising or decivilising themes. Here, the bulk of the research is located in Western Europe (Great Britain, Germany, the Netherlands and France remain the figurational strongholds), with applications of civilising/decivilising themes now cropping up with increased frequency in the United States, Canada, Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, China, and Brazil. Indeed, it seems as if research on the civilised body has never been as alive and well. Morrow (2009) describes the reinvigorated sociological interest in Elias’s construction of the civilising process as the (theoretical) ‘comeback of the century’.

Innovative analyses of civilising and decivilising processes abound. Stephen Mennell (2001, 2007), perhaps the most known contemporary figurationalist (alongside Eric Dunning), has produced most widely acclaimed extensions of the original civilising process model. While long criticised as an esoteric theory of European social development, Mennell (2007) illustrates how Elias’s work provides a central theoretical framework for unpacking long-term sociogenic and psychogenic development cross-contextually. In addition to Mennell’s work, a growing body of literature has, quite predictably after the onset of two globally connected wars in the early 2000s (one frontlined in Afghanistan and the other, Iraq), inspected the dynamics and embodiments of terrorism. Such work represents, in a microcosmic manner, a concerted effort among figurationalists to analyse global detours into decivilising processes. Amongst analyses into the link between terrorism and decivilising processes are Vertigan’s (2010) inspection of anti-Muslim sentiment and terrorist discourses in the United Kingdom, the impact of terrorism and global war campaigns on human rights (Woodiwiss, 2005), and the study of genocide in Rwanda (Brannigan and Jones, 2009). Turner’s (2003) analysis of the link between spirituality and violence codes attends to a neglected line of inquiry between faith/ideology and embodiment in figurationalist research.

Existing recent research on civilising and decivilising trends (those listed above and others) contains insightful connections between Elias’s early work and his later thoughts on power, especially established and outsider relationships. Atkinson and Young (2003), for example, link ongoing civilising processes with the collective embodiment of established-outsider relationships through sports-mega events; specifically, the Olympic Games. Naftali (2010) addresses the established-outsider power relationships enacted through embodied control of Chinese children in family homes. Rohloff and Wright (2010) have recently breathed long overdue theoretical life into moral panic theory, and the embodiment of collective fear whipped up through media campaigns. The role of gossip in organisations and its relationship with informal mechanisms of shaming and embarrassment has also been well documented by Michelson, van Iterson and Waddington (2010).

Figurational theory has been launched into even newer ‘embodied’ terrain of late. Algazi’s (2008) historical research on representations of the body gestures in film, and Binkley’s (2009) analysis of the ways in which commercials employ shaming mechanisms as a means of producing brand loyalty equally attest to the saliency of Eliasian concepts in the study of representational practices. While interests in the mediated body (televisual, cinematic, print, and virtual) abound within sociology, cultural studies, media and communication studies and other disciplines, only recently has figurational theory attracted the attention of those in the ‘mainstream’. Equally burgeoning are research efforts on the social politics and policy practices that help shape perceptions of public health and physical activity (Thing and Ottensen, 2010). More traditionally oriented, but yet innovative, uses of Eliasian theory to study public/private representations of the
body include Bradshaw and Canniford’s (2010) analysis of human excrement and the manner by which ‘vile’ bodily performances are pushed behind the scenes of everyday life.

**ii. Flesh, emotions and performative bodies**

The word performativity is rarely uttered in the same sentence with the term figurational theory. Once firmly linked with Goffman’s dramaturgy (1959), then Butler’s (1990) gender theory and now more recently non-representational theory (Thrift, 2007) and human geographical studies, performativity is however a thematic staple across Elias’s writing and theory. Analyses of emotion performances by Joseph Maguire, Johan Goudsblom, Thomas Scheff, Cas Wouters, Eric Dunning, Dennis Smith and others are well known in figurational circles, the systematic analysis of embodied emotions and their phenomenological experience is being extended into new terrain. Experiencing pleasurable forms of physical suffering (Atkinson, 2008) is, for instance, being contrasted against the body as it performs through the processes of AIDS, cancer and other illnesses (McInerney, 2007). To be sure, the use of Elias’s conceptualisation of human emotions and dying processes is de rigueur within the sociology of health and medicine. Here, *The Loneliness of the Dying* is becoming canonised as essential reading for its clear articulation of the physical, emotional, cognitive and socio-cultural experience of the death ‘performance’.

The embodied performance of violence (not necessarily decoded as emblematic of civilising or decivilising processes) continues as a staple in figurational research. Studies of violence as it is enacted against the body in the suicide process (Whitt, 2010), against others in the context of mixed martial arts (Sanchez and Malcolm, 2010), or in the act of filicide (Websdale, 2010) attest to the enduring significance of Elias’s work for deconstructing how violence, anger and aggression have interlaced biological, psychological and socio-cultural dimensions. A minor trend within Eliasian-inspired work on violence of late is the analysis of urban unrest and civic violence (Jacobs and Wright, 2010) and gang violence (Clement, 2010). With overt and subtle ties to the library of existing figurational research on football hooliganism and patterned fan violence, the analysis of collectively embodied violence shows considerable promise.

If Eliasian theory, and figurationalists employing and extending Elias’s ideas, have under-studied the embodied performance of gender, an even more glaring omission has been the relative lack of attention on the performance of sexual identities. Despite Elias’s clear interest in the embodied performance of sex, his musings on matters sexual contained in *The Civilising Process* are overshadowed by feminist, post-structural, queer (and especially) Foucauldian theoretical positions rising to sociological prominence in the 1980s and 1990s. Nevertheless, Moore’s (2010) analysis of the interdependent nature of gay/lesbian bodies offers a compelling case for the exploration of pronoun-based models of identification in research on sexed identities.

No discussion of figurational sociology and embodiment would be complete, or responsible, without brief mention of centrality of Elias (and his work with Eric Dunning) on sporting bodies. Themes of civilisation and sportisation, figurations and interdependency, emotional restraint, shame, repugnance thresholds, mimesis, exciting significance, established-outsider relations and power, pronoun-based modes of collective identification, sociogenesis/psychogenesis abound in the sport literature. There is no sub-discipline, one might argue on the basis of numbers alone, as influenced by Eliasian theory than the sociology of sport. Eric Dunning, Joe Maguire, Ivan Waddington, Dominic Malcolm, Katie Liston, Andy Smith, Ken Green, Daniel Bloyce, Louise Mansfield, Ruud Stokvis, Maarten van Bottenburg, Kenneth Sheard, Mark Falcous, Grant Jarvie, Patrick Murphy and Elizabeth Pike have made (and, in most cases, continue to make) foundational contributions to the study of sport and physical culture through a figurational lens.

Finally, the study of aesthetically modified and performed body is a rich and fertile area for the application of figurational principles. Modifying the natural body in radical ways to ostensibly alleviate the shame and embarrassment associated with culturally ascribed pathologies (e.g. ugliness, fatness, slimness, slowness, blandness, ordinariness, etc.) is an increasingly popular cultural practice of self-expression in
hyper-consumeristic, style-oriented, reflexively individualistic and self-obsessed societies. With the diffuse medicalisation of everyday life, and sociogenic movement toward hyper-individualistic and risk obsessed cultures (each watershed social turns of the twentieth century), the door has been opened for a full gamut of body modifications to be explored in everyday life. Forms of body modification including cosmetic surgery, self-cutting, self/sexual asphyxiation, scarring and burning, sub-dermal implanting, weight-loss surgeries, branding, self-trepanning, amputation and maiming, piercing, flesh hook hanging and suspensions, gender reassignment, tattooing, weightlifting/muscle-building and genetic manipulation are now being re-examined along figurational lines (Atkinson, 2003, 2007, 2008).

**Future directions: Physical cultural studies as a case example**

In a comprehensive review of Eliasian thought, Quilley and Loyal (2005: 825) write, ‘The relationship between social and biological (neuropsychological, medico-physiological, ecological, evolutionary) processes is central to an expanding range of contemporary intellectual and policy problems – from global warming to aggression and the regulation of violence. For this reason there is a pressing need for a more coherent, interdisciplinary human science.’ Interdisciplinary models of human science are often difficult to achieve in practice as people across disciplines often find considerable difficult in sharing languages and modalities of knowing. For example, despite the range of Eliasian-inspired research on embodiment covered in this chapter, rarely do these accounts adopt an interdisciplinary tone or ontological flavour, or explore the interdisciplinary implications (and perhaps necessities) of the hinge. In short, there are often scarce grounds for interdisciplinary teams to conceptually meet and research on the same theoretical (even theoretical) playing field. What is needed are truly interdisciplinary theories with interdisciplinary implications and policy foci. As researchers of embodiment are progressively asking interdisciplinary questions and seeking the advice of specialists in fields beyond their own knowledge boundaries, the time is beyond right to pursue existing theoretical scaffolding already buttressed by cross-disciplinary sensitivities.

I draw the ‘field’ of inquiry in which I situate my research, physical cultural studies, as a means of illustration. Physical cultural studies (PCS) is an emerging sub-disciplinary space, defined as an inter- and trans-disciplinary approach to the analysis of human movement, embodiment and corporeal representation within and across social institutions and cultural groups (Andrews, 2008; Atkinson, 2011). PCS research is theoretically driven, empirically grounded and sensitive to the prospects of working with diverse community partners to improve the social organisation, cultural prominence, impact, and collective experience of sport, exercise, play and physical activity and education in the round. PCS researchers produce local, national and cross-national analyses of how sport, exercise and physical activity may be contexts where social inclusion, health, safety, human rights promotion is evident and human physical, intellectual, artistic and moral potentials are supported without fear or prejudice. PCS research recognises that existing social problems in sport and physical activity zones are materially based and culturally mediated; strives to produce theoretically informed and empirically verified suggestions for policy change; and promotes models of sport, physical activity and human movement as contexts of social integration that celebrate diversity (Atkinson, 2011). A practical and radical PCS involves the deconstruction and destabilisation of identities, practices, logics, institutions, and images of power in sports and health worlds, suggesting concrete policy amendments, rule changes or progressive cultural adaptations to foster more equitable and pleasurable sport, health and physical activity environments for all.

The brand of PCS outlined above emerges from sociologies of sport, cultural studies, the body and gender studies more broadly, and is ostensibly socio-cultural in its orientation. But a keen appreciation of its contents reveals how it squarely focuses on matters of embodiment from a trans-disciplinary perspective on physical cultures. How does one, for example, truly know the ‘pleasures’ of human movement in sport settings or elsewhere from a strictly socio-cultural orientation? By contrast, can the exploitation and abuse of children in global football cultures be understood only along psychological lines? A PCS future forward
is established through the exploration of meta-synthesising theories and ideas in trans-disciplinary research. The PCS oeuvre has been, in no small part, informed by a reinvigorated interest in the intersection between biology, psychology and socio-cultural studies of human (population) health, the influence on epidemiology in the analysis of embodied practice, and a post-Foucauldian boom in the analysis of institutional biopedagogies (Rail, Holmes and Murray, 2010; Rich and Evans, 2005). Yet while PCS researchers collectively appreciate the benefit of synthesising and integrating theoretical ideas from a range of fields in the pursuit of solutions to health, wellness and physical activity problems for people, rarely are boundary lines crossed in everyday research practice.

As a PCS researcher, I am concerned with matters of sport and physical activity for/as social development, movement cultures as potential solutions to broad gauge social problems, human rights in sport and leisure contexts, visions of democratic humanism across physical cultures, physical cultural ‘pastimes’, post-sport physical cultures, issues in bioethics and technology, youth development through mainstream and non-mainstream biopedagogies, the pleasures of dance and aesthetic movement practices, experiences of health, wellness, varied (dis)abilities, and illness as/in physical culture, global sport, leisure and recreation management, and the sensual aspects of physical culture. In each and all of these respective areas, there are scarce empirical grounds to argue that any disciplinary is sufficient to address the matters with the complexity required to capture their embodied realities and experiences. As a starting point in PCS and other (sub)disciplinary streams of inquiry, an analytic toolkit provided by Eliasian notions of the hinge can perhaps be of potential many points of departure for encouraging the sort of interdisciplinary work required to conceptualise human physical cultural problems, experiences and expression in truly object-adequate and reality congruent manners.

Final Thoughts

In an interview on Dutch television on April 23, 1975, Elias’s closing remarks to his interviewer were, ‘I wish you all the pleasurable excitement one can have without hurting others and one’s own dignity.’ Captured in one brief statement were the stereotypical themes associated with his sociology over the course of the twentieth century: emotions, self-restraint, repugnance thresholds and civilising tendencies. The future of figurational sociology within the academy, and its potential for informing lines of research on embodiment, may very well depend on a divergence from stereotypes about and traditional treatments of Elias’s thought. As I argue in this chapter, a deeper and richer exploration of the hinge can provide a fruitful avenue of exploration. In closing, let us consider an example from the world of research begging for a hinge-based analysis.

Gabor Maté is a Hungarian-born medical doctor living in Vancouver, Canada. He conducts research on drug addiction, mental illness, attention deficit disorder and other conditions often attributed to strictly genetic or physiologically pathogenic causes. He is the staff physician at the Portland Hotel in downtown Vancouver, a residence and resource centre for the people suffering from addiction and mental disorders in the city’s core. Many of his patients suffer from mental illness, drug addiction and HIV, or all three. Among his internationally best-selling books is Shattered Minds: A New Look at the Origins and Healing of Attention Deficit Disorder (Maté, 2000). In the book, Maté argues it is impossible that a complex condition of the brain such as attention deficit disorder (ADD) could be a simple matter of biological heredity. For the true etiology of ADD clinicians need to probe the social and psychological conditions that shape the brains of children in early twenty-first century Western societies. Maté contends that most human brain development occurs outside the safety of the uterus, in the first years of life, when highly vulnerable to environmental circumstances (neurologists refer to this as the neuroplasticity of the brain). Nerve cells and neurological circuits compete for survival during early childhood in a process called neural Darwinism: those receiving the necessary stimulation are strengthened and become ‘wired in’, while those that do not, fail to develop and die.
In attention deficit disorder the chief physiological problem appears to be located in the frontal lobe of the brain, in the area of the cortex (or gray matter) where attention is allocated and emotions and impulses are regulated. Just as the visual circuits need the stimulation of light, the circuits of attention and emotion control also need the appropriate input: a calm, non-stressed connection with non-stressed and non-distracted primary caregivers. Stresses on caregiving adults predispose children to ADD because they directly affect the developing electrical circuits of the infant’s brain. Thus, Maté asserts, although there is in ADD an inherited or biological predisposition in some cases, the condition itself is rooted in social-cultural and historical factors that have placed nearly intolerable, fragmented burdens on the parenting environment that do not facilitate the development of self-control in children. Why the sudden boom in ADD diagnoses globally over the past decade and a half? Is this merely an artifact of medical identification and diagnosis? Not really. The erosion of community, the breakdown of the extended family, the pressures on marriage relationships, the harried lives of nuclear families still intact and the growing sense of insecurity even in the midst of relative wealth have all combined to create an emotional milieu in which calm, attuned parenting is becoming alarmingly difficult. As the human brain is both biologically and socially constituted, so then is attention deficit disorder. If I did not know better, I would assume Maté read Elias at some point in his training. If he has not, he probably should.

Bibliography


