

REINSTATING FUNCTIONALISM IN THE FIGURATIONAL APPROACH TO ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract. *Over the past two decades, there have been attempts to apply ideas from figurational sociology founded by Norbert Elias in research of different aspects of organizational life. The central contributions are derived from his theory of the civilizing process and the principles of process sociology. While this research mostly is relevant for contemporary organization theory, many contributions tend to emphasize Elias's relational approach to the neglect of his functionalism, which underlies the whole corpus of Elias's works. Rediscovery of Elias's functionalism opens up the way for a fruitful reinterpretation of the central concept of his sociology, figuration, and enables to find new ways of combining figurational sociology with more familiar approaches to organization theory, in particular, with contingency theory. This helps to identify the factor of technology in the theory of the civilizing process and place it in the context of the concepts of figurational sociology such as interdependence, power and subjectivity, which enhances the analytical strength of figurational approach to organizations. The paper discusses some applications of figurational sociology to date and points to new directions in the study of organizations with the use of the conceptual tools of figurational approach.*

Keywords: *civilizing process, figuration, functionalism, interdependence, organization, relationism, technology.*

Introduction

In the field of organization studies there has been increase of interest in the works of Norbert Elias and attempts to apply his theories to the study of various types of organizations. Elias's most widely known work is the theory of the civilizing process, the study of the change of *habitus* in societies of Western Europe (Elias, 2000). On the level of theoretical reflection he elaborated the concepts of figuration, *habitus*, power, processual relationships between individuals and society, and his approach came to be known as figurational sociology. The term 'figuration' was derived from a more commonly used term configuration, and in fact he sometimes used this latter word in his writings as well. Figurations are defined as "networks of interdependent human beings, with shifting asymmetrical power balances" (Mennell, 1998, p.252). Elias applied the concept of figuration to the study of state formation in France and in his research

of the court of the French king, but he argued that all social formations, such as families, schools, towns, bureaucracies and social strata are *figurations*, the webs of human interdependencies (Elias, 1978, p.15).

Elias did not study specifically modern organizations, but organization and management scholars have applied Elias's approach to study organizations as figurations. In his works Elias has weaved a complex web of ideas around the concept of figuration. Thus, he argued that certain forms of interdependencies are conducive for development of particular forms of *habitus* (social personality structure, psychic make-up), that sociogenesis is connected with psychogenesis. This aspect of Elias's works attracted attention of organization scholars in order to better understand the formation of organizational subjectivity in the rapidly changing world. As organizational forms are changing, how does that impact on behavior, self-regulation, attitudes and identities of those involved in them? This is a question with practical implications for managers of all kinds of organizations, including educational institutions. Elias's theories can help to address this issue.

In a recent publication Robert van Krieken has provided an overview of contributions of figural research of organizations and advocated for the development of process-figural theory in organization studies (van Krieken, 2018). This research demonstrates the fruitful use of the works of Elias for the study of organizations and management. For example, Elias's concept of power balance has been useful for the study of power relationships within and between organizations. Elias's conception of social change as partly unplanned process has been used in the study of organizational change, implementation of strategies and dynamics of organizational fields (Dopson, 2001). His refined conceptualization of the relationships between individuals and society furnish organization researchers with better tools to understand the relationships between agency and structure and the processes of organizational learning (Connolly & Dolan, 2012; Stacey, 2003). Figural approach to organizations may be seen as an alternative to institutionalism, actor-network theory, Foucauldian conceptions and technically oriented management systems.

This literature, however, raises concern about the accuracy of interpretation of the works of Elias. Some authors have characterized Elias's approach as relational (van Krieken, 2018; Connolly, 2016; Stacey, 2007; Kaspersen & Gabriel, 2008). While it is true that Elias used relational categories in his research, considering his work as representing 'relationism' leads to misunderstanding of his sociology and distortions in application of his works to organizations. Unbiased reading of his books and essays makes it clear that Elias followed functionalist mode of reasoning and in fact used the concept of function frequently throughout all his major publications. But his functionalism is processual and compatible with conflict theory, which makes it different from structural functionalism. This article critiques abstract relationism as a way of interpretation

of Elias's sociology and with the reference to his works shows that functionalism was cognate to his mode of thinking. It argues that the 'discovery' of Elias's functionalism can be helpful in the application of his theories to the field of organizations. Reinstating functionalism in the applications of Elias's sociology to organizations can stimulate dialogue between figurational and more 'traditional' approaches to organizations and introduce technology in figurational sociology. Taking account of technology is topical for figurational approach because it is evident that technology nowadays is a significant trigger of social change.

The Issue of Relationism

There is a ground to see relational thinking in Elias's sociology. He often emphasized the fundamental directedness of human beings towards each other, which finds expression in human psychology, social interdependence and even in anatomic build-up. He continuously criticized the over-individualized image of human beings as autonomous actors opposed to groups and society, – an image which is still widespread in social sciences. He called it a *homo clausus* view of the humans, and counterposed to that his *homines aperti* conception of human beings. Humans, he pointed out, develop their identities in the process of interaction; their goals, their interests arise in relations with other people and gratifications which people seek are derived from the social intercourse and in relations with other humans. A child can become an adult only through relationships of the child with the grownups surrounding him. The very process of individualization is the social process, as Elias has stressed, and is determined and made possible by certain configurations of the social structure. The psychical make-up, the human *habitus*, is formed in figurations. These figurations are in the process of change, the process of historical development; and, likewise, the human subjectivity, the forms of self-control, the ways of experiencing and expressing of emotions also have histories.

Such approach allowed Elias to put forward his theory of the civilizing process. The main contention in Elias's book "*The Civilizing Process*" is that the forms of behaviour, the psychic make-up, the personality structures of the people in Western Europe (as he studied this process mainly on the case of France) have changed from the medieval ages to early modern and modern times. These changes, from more coarse to more refined, "civilized" behaviour took place in conjunction with the changes of the figurations. Increase of power of the central ruler and gradual pacification of the territory of the French kingdom led to the development of a stronger, more stable, and all-around self-control of the upper strata, and later among common people. Increase of economic interdependence, economic transactions, development of markets compelled people to develop

foresight and calculating ability. These links discovered by Elias are of interest to the study of organizations. Organizations themselves represent various forms of interdependencies, which undergo rapid changes in contemporary world. There may be expected and in fact are observed changes in identities, forms of conduct, self-control and expression of employees brought about by organizational transformations.

In explaining the process of macrosocial change in France from early middle ages to the age of absolutism Elias focused attention on the relations between the king, the nobility and bourgeois groups. These social actors were interdependent, but toward absolutism the dependence of nobility and bourgeoisie on the king rose and the king used that increased dependence on him to strengthen his power. The same players – the king, the nobility and bourgeoisie were in his study of court society, but here he focused more on the inner relationships among the king and courtiers. These relationships were characterized by both cooperation and competition and covert or open power struggles. Elias, observing these figural macrohistorical processes from a highly abstract and detached point of view, compared them with a ‘dance’ (Elias, 2000, p.482).

Abstract relationism is reflected in applications to organization studies and management in peculiar conceptions of organizations. Ralph Stacey argues against the conception of organization as a system or as a whole. Many people, says Stacey, reify organization, talking about it as a thing or a living system, an organism; they anthropomorphise organizations, ascribing to them purpose and direction (Stacey, 2005, p.478; Stacey, 2007, p.298). But organizations do not exist as things, they are imagined. The more adequate way to think about organizations, according to Stacey, is in terms of communicative interaction. The social exists in the patterned processes of interaction: “it is these patterns of communicative interaction, this activity of communication that I take to be the experience of organization. For me, then, organizations are temporal processes, the ongoing action of communication which is both cooperative and competitive...” (Stacey, 2005, p.479). In order to overcome thinking in terms of reified entities, one has to conceptualize organizations in terms of temporal processes: “Organizations are then understood as processes of human relating and it is in the simultaneously cooperative-consensual and conflictual-competitive relating between people that they perpetually construct their future together in the present” (Stacey 2007, p.299).

Dutch management scholar Willem Mastebroek argues that with the help of sociology of Norbert Elias it is possible to overcome excessive complexity and look beneath the stream of fashionable conceptualizations in management and to arrive at the fundamental categories which underlie all theories of organizations; these categories, in Mastebroek’s view, are interdependence/steering and autonomy (Mastebroek, 2002a, p.187; 2002b, p.206). By looking through the

historical development of managerial techniques is it possible to see certain trends, specifically, that, in course of centuries, one can discern the shift from greater steering and discipline towards more autonomy and self-organization. These trends may be observed in different spheres, for example in the army and military tactics and business enterprises. Modern organizational designs took centuries to evolve and crucial precondition for that was the process of development of higher levels of self-discipline, which took many generations to internalize (Mastenbroek, 2002b, p.217). Mastenbroek argues that “organizations are to be viewed from a dynamic relational perspective” (Mastenbroek, 2002a, p.185). He puts forward the following definition: “An organization is a continually changing network of relations” (Mastenbroek, 2002b, p.205).

The problem with these and similar accounts is one-sided way in which the works of Elias have been interpreted and applied to conceptualize organizations. It is simplified and insufficient to see organizations just as networks of relations or as processes of human relating. Elias in fact objected to the attempts to trace his sociological work to philosophical relationism and was critical to ‘relationism’ as a ‘formalistic category’ (Elias in: Kilminster & Wouters, 1995, p.101). He indeed, as Kilminster and Wouters have noted, was a synthesizer, concerned with being sensitive to the complexity of the real social world he studied (Kilminster & Wouters, 1995, p. 83).

Processual Functionalism

Elias argued against reifying conceptions of society and social formations, which picture society or institutions as things, objectified and dehumanized entities (Elias, 1978, p.16). Instead, he suggested that social scientists should think of people as mutually oriented, directed towards each other and linked into networks through various kinds of interdependencies. Elias considered the concept of human interdependence to be the most fundamental for the sociology that he developed. But there are different kinds of interdependencies in humans societies, humans are linked with each other in most diverse ways (Elias, 1978, p.15). Some bonds are affective and personal, other bonds are impersonal, such as occupational specialization or integration into states (Elias, 1978, p.175). Humans are interdependent with each other because people have needs for each other in order to survive and in order to sustain their social identity. Individuals fulfill certain “functions” for each other, that is, regularized activities in the service of others. In “*The Society of Individuals*” Elias used explicitly functionalist language, where he defined society as a “network of the functions which people have for each other” (Elias, 1991, p.16).

He considered it to be a sign of scientific approach to move from the concept of action to the concept of function because the latter expresses a more detached

way of thinking about social reality (Elias, 1978, p.56). Elias did not completely reject the idea of social functions which are performed for society. But he considered that the way the term 'function' is used in structural functionalism is limiting, because it is problematic to speak of societies as closed systems with fixed boundaries, and because a social scientist has to take into account functions performed by a certain actor not just toward the 'system' but also toward the members of the social unit (Elias, 1978, p.12). The concept of the system is static, and Elias preferred to talk about functional interdependencies as *processes*. Functional nexuses of interdependent people are dynamic and changing because of arising new needs and because people are interdependent both through cooperation and competition. Competitive relationships and power struggles within figurations make the outcomes of their interactions unpredictable. The concept of *figuration* has to be reinterpreted in such a way as to point to the functional underpinning of the idea of interdependence. It can be defined as a nexus of functionally interdependent human beings with the shifting power balances.

The concept of interdependence has been widely employed in the figural studies of organizations. But the term is used in a not very definite way. It is not quite clear what is to be counted as interdependence, and what kinds of interdependencies there exist. Thus, British sociologist Tim Newton asks, whether Elias is right to argue that there is a strong correlation between complex interdependencies and a disciplined subjectivity. He argues that one can mention exceptions: "Most individuals are engaged in highly complex economic interdependency webs, yet are blissfully unaware or unconcerned at their predicament. For instance, I will probably never meet the people who grew the cotton that I wear, or the banana that I eat" (Newton, 2001, p.488). The question, however, is whether these examples really constitute interdependence. It may be argued that producers and consumers of banana in current economic conditions are very loosely coupled, or minimally interdependent. From the perspective of international relations that would be merely the case of exchange, not interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 2001).

There is a need for figural sociology to develop a typology of interdependencies, which is a complex task; but it is possible to approach this problem with the use of contingency theory developed in research of organizations. In contingency theory there are distinguished three degrees of interdependence: pooled, sequential and reciprocal. Pooled is the weakest form, the actors involved are dependent on each other only as contributors to the final product they are making. In sequential interdependence the actors are dependent on others for the time and stage of their contribution in the process of production. In reciprocal interdependence actors' actions and decisions are simultaneously dependent on each other (Scott & Davis, 2016, p.127). The crucial component in

contingency theory is technology. Technology furthermore is characterized by higher or lower complexity, and by higher or lower degree of predictability. The principal finding of the contingency theory is that characteristics of technology affect organization structure. For example, if the company works with unit production, then it is likely that technology is not specialized and organization structure is organic. If organization deals with the standardized production, it uses more specialized technology and the organization structure is more formalized. Higher levels of unpredictability are associated with lower standardization, but higher levels of interdependence with greater managerial oversight. There are different ways how to characterize technology and several versions of contingency theory put forward by such authors as Thompson, Perrow and Galbraith (Hatch, 2018); but the point is that technological processes, the kinds of methods and instruments of work are employed in production affect what kinds of interdependencies there will be in the organization and what kind of management style there will be more appropriate. Technologies in fact do influence the structure of social relationships, the forms of interdependencies and the way people conduct themselves.

Technology and Figural Research of Organizations

One of the problems of strictly relational social theory is the conception of causality (Emirbayer, 1997, p.307). There is a danger of circularity in relational thinking. Thus, Stacey, arguing from the relational point of view, puts it in the following way: „Interacting individuals are forming the patterns of their interaction, the social, while at the same time they are being formed as individuals by their patterns of interaction” (Stacey, 2007, p.295). Such „paradoxical” or „dialectical” theory of causality may not be satisfactory for empirically oriented social research and for those seeking more analytical accounts of social change. In many places throughout his works Elias was ambiguous with respect to the issue of causality, but in general he was in favour of multicausal explanations (Elias, 1978).

In his historical account of the changes in Western Europe Elias pointed to the fact that advances in *production and transportation technologies*, long before the industrial era, had led to greater connectivity and interdependence among different geographic areas in Europe (Elias, 2000, p.225). Technological improvements in agriculture have led to the growth of population which induced further division of labour, development of artisanry, occupational specialization and the growth of the cities. These changes gave rise to the markets and monetary exchange, which played an important role in Elias’s explanation of the development of the state as a centralized monopoly on taxation and violence. His account on the centralization of the state of France in high middle ages can be

interpreted in terms of contingency theory, which should not be taken as a surprise, because the state, in fact, *is an organization* (In „*The Court Society*” Elias encouraged considering the states as organizations (Elias, 2006, 151). Furthermore, in his study of the court society Elias explored how the knightly nobility in France became more dependent on the king and flocked to his court, seeking king’s support and recognition. Their behaviour accordingly changed from the brutish manners of the warriors to the “tamed” and pacified conduct of courtiers. Underlying this change was transformation of a decentralized figuration of feudalism to the centralized figuration of absolutism. But there were particular causes of this transformation. The power base of the nobility had been their military function as mounted warriors, the cavalry, which played important role in the middle ages warfare. From the beginning of the 16th century there was a shift in the warfare tactics as the Europeans began to use gunpowder and *firearms* became predominant in battles. The use of firearms required artillery and trained infantry (Tilly, 1992, p.76). From that time on, nobility gradually lost its power base as an independent social group and was ultimately defunctionalized (Elias, 2006, p.166-167, p.311).

Technology, however, is practically absent from the figural accounts of organizations. For instance, Mastenbroek has looked at the forms of organization of battle units in the European armies from 16th to 20th centuries. He notices the tendency for the tactical units to become more mobile and capable for autonomous action in the battlefields. Those tactical units which were granted more autonomy and were capable for more independent maneuvering in the battlefield proved to be more effective in warfare (Mastenbroek, 2002a). But he does not pay sufficient attention to the fact that such capability of military units was not only the result of training and discipline but also of the technical improvements of weaponry and communication technologies. Conceptualization of organizations just as networks of relationships gives access only to social-psychological plane of organization processes. Rather, organizations are, as representatives of actor-network theory argue, quite heterogeneous entities composed of people, interactions, strategies, information, technical appliances, and other objects (Callon & Law, 1997).

The links between the patterns of interdependencies and forms of subjectivity, identity, and *habitus*, discovered and studied by Elias and his followers, are informative for contemporary research of organizations. But it is important to acknowledge that the patterns of interdependence in and between organizations are influenced by production and communication technologies, which are rapidly changing in the modern world.

Steward Clegg and Ad van Iterson, using the works of Elias, explored the consequences of organizational changes on the employee’s self-regulation. Contemporary organizations increasingly use ‘non-traditional’ forms of work,

coordination and control (Clegg & van Iterson, 2013). Many companies use more decentralized methods of supervision, practice multi-tasking and job enlargement, work in semi-autonomous work teams, develop more inter-organizational linkages. There is a weakening of temporal and spatial concentration which is seen in such phenomena as teleworking, working from home, geographically distributed work units and virtual teams. Organizations become, as it were, 'liquid'. This situation is very different from traditional organizations when presence in the same physical locations imposed certain obligations on face-to-face contacts and communication. Clegg and van Iterson reflect on the possible effects of these tendencies for the employees' subjectivity and behavior. As a starting point they refer to Elias's observation that denser forms of interdependence lead to stricter self-control. On the one hand, the self-control of employees may be expected to weaken because of the diminished effect of co-presence. On the other hand, the employees may need to develop a strong self-control and foresight because their situations in the organizations are more fluid and precarious and because they are involved in longer and more extensive chains of interdependencies which they must keep in sight. These hypotheses are worth exploring and further elaborating but it must be taken into account that these new forms of work and interdependencies are not just the outcome of long-term processes, as the authors seem to suggest, but were enabled by specific innovations in information and communication technologies. The network form of enterprise, with its flexible inter-organizational cooperation and distanced modes of working and the rise of network economy in general were engendered by the developments in computer technologies and emergence of the internet (Castells, 2000). Closer look at characteristics of these technologies and the forms of cooperation and coordination they facilitate will provide with more precise criteria for assessing the balance between autonomy and interdependence in contemporary organizational processes. This will make possible more accurate studies of the changes in self-regulation and subjectivity of employees.

Another promising direction of inquiry is associated with organizational environment. Under conditions of 'liquid modernity' organizations increasingly exhibit the features of open systems (Clegg & Baumeler, 2010). Employees are mobile and not any longer fully 'contained' in their work places. Their identities are not formed predominantly in the organizations where they are employed. In this context van Krieken raised a relevant issue about conceptualization of the environment in the theories of organizations and modernity (van Krieken, 1996). Elias's works may be of use here because of his emphasis on the dynamic, shifting networks of interdependent individuals. Theories developed in figurational sociology about the civilizing, de-civilizing processes and informalization can be useful. The concepts of *network society* and *digital culture* may be suitable options for describing the modern condition for the purposes of organization

studies (van Dijk, 2020; Miller, 2020). Discussion of individualization by Elias is to some degree paralleled in the works on network society. In this context Elias's contention that individual identities are inseparable from collective "we" identities is important (Elias, 1991). In the liquid world there is increase in the factors and influences which form collective identities. The processes of disembedding, time-space distancing and participation in virtual communities produce new configurations in which collective identities are constructed. Digital technologies also provide new possibilities how people experience their selves and construct the narratives about themselves.

Conclusion

Research of organizations in which Elias's concepts and theories are applied demonstrate their usefulness and capacity to address the issues which are topical for contemporary organization theory. Interpretation of the works of Elias only in terms of relational approach is limiting and produces a rather narrow view of organizations. In this article it has been argued that the strength of figurational analysis will be enhanced if Elias's functionalism is taken seriously into account when interpreting his concepts. Fuller employment of his open-systems, processual functionalism brings more phenomena of organizational life into focus. Establishing functionalism in the figurational sociology provides a platform for the dialogue with contingency theories, which are based on functionalist paradigm. Another gain is introduction of *technology* as a factor shaping different forms of interdependencies. The study of parameters of production and communication technologies may help to differentiate between types and gradations of interdependence, which will advance figurational sociology in general. Two directions of research are identified. First, theories of figurational approach can be used to study the effects of new forms of organizational coordination and control on the subjectivity, the *habitus*, or self-regulation of the employees. Second, theories of the civilizing and de-civilizing processes, informalization and individualization can help to understand the parameters of change of organizational environments. Advancement of the research in these directions should contribute to a better understanding of forms of subjectivity of individuals occupying different positions in modern organizations, including students, teachers and managers in educational institutions.

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