

Editor's Introduction: Going beyond our present

Volume 3, Issue 1, February 2014

Permalink: <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0003.101> [<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.11217607.0003.101>]

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Whether you are a regular reader of *Human Figurations*, a temporary sojourner attracted by the diverse range of topics and contributors, or someone intrigued by our laudable aspiration to contribute to *higher-level synthesis* in social inquiry on all aspects of the human condition, this issue should be of some interest to you. It sustains the spirit of scientific inquiry espoused so distinctly by Norbert Elias during his lifetime while its wide-ranging contents are a timely precursor (of sorts) of the launch later this year of the Collected Works of Norbert Elias at the University of Leicester. There the totality of his life's work, as a person and human being, and as a sociologist will be celebrated. An academic conference at the same venue (scheduled for 20-22 June 2014) will also mark an opportunity to assess further the potential for the future development of *high-level synthesis* in social inquiry, this being one of the landmarks of Elias' distinctive approach to the study of humans and the societies in which they live. [\[1\]](#) [\[#N1\]](#)

Elias saw himself as but a link in the chain of generations of scientists committed to the production of more reality congruent knowledge on the complexities of social life. The five contributors to this first issue of 2014 take up this mantle admirably in their treatment of a range of theoretical and empirical topics. The latter include a historical-sociological analysis of the ways in which adult men and women suffering from depression presented themselves when seeking help at a Dutch outpatient clinic for psychoanalytic therapy, and the role of child institutions in forming and disseminating ideas about what it means to be a civilised person in the Danish welfare state. The former make the case variously for: the integration of Elias's configurational approach, Bourdieu's explication of habitus and other relevant scientific knowledge; a non-imperial understanding of 'civilisation', one based on ideas of dialogue and respect; and, imposingly, for the use of Elias's 'triad of controls' as universally applicable guidelines for analyzing social and psychic processes. But, even these very brief descriptions do not do justice to the close relationship that is exhibited between theory and empirical data in the papers published here. For this, we advocate the reader's leisurely immersion in each.

Opening the issue, Westerbeek, Meeuwesen, Brinkgreve and Gomperts demonstrate the ways in which configurational sociology adds a processual dimension to what they describe as the snapshot approach of symbolic interactionists. The figuration studied by them here is the psychoanalytic assessment interview during the second half of the twentieth century in the Netherlands. Their research objective was to examine how clients with milder but persistent depressive symptoms presented themselves, what aspects of this changed in the course of the second half of the twentieth century, and what gender patterns could be observed. They identified self-blaming, self-relativising and self-respecting strategies in their typology, the dynamics of which appeared to be related to time and gender. For them, the gradually decreasing contrasts in power relations between clients and psychoanalysts framed the context within which the client-therapist conversations took place and this had a stronger effect on female than on male clients. Westerbeek *et al.* also combine aspects of their qualitative analysis with a quantitative consideration of their significance; a distinctive and important approach indeed given the often fruitless and unhelpful paradigmatic wars that dominate contemporary research methods.

In a focus on nearby Denmark, Gilliam and Gulløv argue that child institutions – kindergartens and schools – have been central to the integrating and civilising processes of the last century. To a large extent, they portray

these processes as part of a state project, given that the means and aims of childcare and education have been part and parcel of the expanding Danish welfare state. However, the authors' ethnographic material from Danish kindergartens and schools also shows that these child institutions are not merely executing a civilising project on behalf of the state, but have themselves been highly influential in defining and disseminating norms of civilised behaviour. Choosing the term 'civilising projects' rather than 'civilising offensives', Gilliam and Gulløv describe civilising intentions and practices, which are not necessarily targeted at specific groups regarded as uncivilised, but are more generalised and institutionalised civilising efforts. For them, welfare institutions have become part of civilising processes, not only as reflections of changeable state-visions but as dominant definers themselves.

Kasper shifts the focus more explicitly to the potential offered by higher-level synthesis in the social sciences. For her, Elias's figural approach offers the potential to advance sociology in this way and suggests an effective means for studying dynamic social relations of interdependence and their socio-environmental implications. Supported by a figural structure, her approach is to derive a maximally parsimonious framework to develop a general model that portrays the fundamental patterns of social life as they can be understood according to the evidence at hand. At its base are *biophysical conditions* that underlie all human activity. It is within these conditions that people develop certain kinds of *figurations*. Developing within particular figural circumstances, people form a certain kind of *habitus* — a society-specific 'second nature' — the natural *products* of which (perceptions, practices, works and the overall systems of these that make up a lifestyle) are oriented by it in particular ways. These products exert *impacts* on people and the world, thereby influencing the conditions within which figural patterns continue to develop, and so on.

Moving the reader's attention to international relations, Gallo assesses the ongoing debate about the *intersection* — as he calls it — between 'civilisation' and 'empire'. He considers the literature on the 'empire/civilisation' link and proposes here that we can analyse four main intellectual perspectives, and envisage a common thread running through them. These are: Elias's paradigm; Marxism; the 'multiple modernities' approach, and; post colonialism and critical theory. For him, each approach has specific strengths but Gallo suggests a different and non-imperial understanding of 'civilisation', one based in ideas of dialogue and respect, and particularly relevant in an age in which a more balanced international order has become a global political priority.

Finally, Wouters' paper starts by focusing on the 'triad of controls', a concept that Elias presents as one of the 'criteria of social development' and refers to three fundamental controls of people in society. These are: the control of humans over extra-human natural events; the control of people over each other; and, the control of each person over him or herself. This triad, Wouters argues, has not received the acclaim it deserves, being brought to life only in the work of Johan Goudsblom. Here he discusses how Elias himself presented the triad of controls in his work and, following this, Wouters presents these as universally applicable guidelines for analysing social and psychic processes. Together, the triad of control and the related seven balances — the balances of competition and cooperation, power and control, formalisation and informalisation, the we—I balance, the balance of involvement and detachment, and the lust-balance — offer a very useful research manual and support the use of the theory of civilising processes as a 'workable synthesis'.

Taken together, the nine authors display a willingness to go beyond their present and to build upon the work of generations of scientists committed to understanding, with greater adequacy, the complexities of the human condition. In so doing they also consider a better future in which higher-level synthesis (and not disaggregation or paradigmatic segregation) might become a far more significant feature of the social sciences. For without this, the vision for sociology — greater scientific autonomy and paradigmatic resolution — remains unfulfilled. If, like the previous one, this issue serves to draw attention to synthesizing innovations

and to provide a stimulus for an exploration of their implications for our cumulative understanding of the human condition, then it has fulfilled one of the stated objectives of *Human Figurations*.

Thank you to the contributors of this issue for their patience and ongoing support as we transition towards an online submission and peer review process. May I extend my personal thanks also to the administrative team for their diligence in bringing this issue to fruition while managing many other personal and professional demands. To you the reader I say peruse this issue not just to amuse yourself or for the narrow purposes of simple instruction. Read, as Oscar Wilde suggests, in order to live, for it is what you read when you don't have to that determines what you will be when you can't help it.

Dr. Katie Liston

Note

1. For further information on this conference, see

<https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/sociology/research/conferences-and-workshops-1/from-the-past-to-the-present-and-towards-possible-futures-the-collected-works-of-norbert-elias>

[<https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/sociology/research/conferences-and-workshops-1/from-the-past-to-the-present-and-towards-possible-futures-the-collected-works-of-norbert-elias>]. ↗ [#N1_ptr1]

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Online ISSN: 2166-6644