Codifying Figurational Theory and Mapping Common Ground in Sociology…and Beyond

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Abstract: Many significant advances in the sciences depended upon a shift away from viewing their respective subject matter as static and independent toward seeing relations and processes among them. Within sociology, efforts in that direction are apparent, but have not yet effected widespread disciplinary change. I contend that Elias' figurational 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. Integrating Elias' figurational approach, Bourdieu's explication of habitus, and relevant scientific knowledge, I codify a general figurational theory and propose a model to help convey it and guide its use.

Keywords: figuration, Elias, habitus, Bourdieu, theory, socio-environmental

> ***fig•ur•a•tion*** n. *1. the act of shaping into a particular figure. 2. the resulting figure or shape…*
> — Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, 1983*

Over the past century and a half, a number of sciences have undergone transformative paradigm shifts. The static universe of classical physics gave way to one that is dynamic and fundamentally unpredictable. Geology's view of the earth's land masses as stable until altered by catastrophe has been supplanted by one that sees ongoing change via ceaseless activity within the earth. In biology, species once believed to be immutable came to be understood in a wholly different way in the context of an increasingly nuanced grasp of the mechanisms of evolution. And qualities of the mind that used to be considered innate, or at least relatively fixed upon formation, are now understood within psychology and related neurosciences to be extraordinarily plastic due to the ongoing reconfiguration of neural networks. The advances made in these sciences, and subsequently in social thought, share a common thread: the transition from seeing their subject matter as a collection of separate and static entities to recognising the interdependent relations and ongoing processes at work in them. While such a shift has been underway in sociology, its progress has been slow and remains somewhat hidden.

Given the co-dependence of different levels of scientific knowledge, some delay in sociology's transition is to be expected. There are, however, other reasons for sociology's failure to advance despite requisite progress in other sciences. Among them are assumptions of disciplinary autonomy and concepts that are inadequate for communicating effectively about human social relations. Together, and in the context of other challenges, these conditions contribute to the incoherence so often observed in sociological theory, especially in the absence of common theoretical ground for understanding and investigating human social life. Given the increasing and urgent demand for a more comprehensive theory of social processes, especially from those who study large-scale socio-ecological problems, this is an enormous void. Fortunately, we already have much of what we need to fill it.

In what follows, I review Elias's model of relations among the sciences as a basis for understanding sociology's relative disciplinary autonomy. From that emerge some foundational premises, which affirm the need for alternative concepts to more adequately represent social reality. I discuss two such alternatives already at our disposal: figurations and habitus. Synthesizing Elias' figurational approach, Bourdieu's explication of habitus, and relevant knowledge from other sciences, I derive a general theoretical framework that can facilitate the conveyance and use of sociological theory, while also providing common ground from which inquiries into complex interdisciplinary questions can more effectively proceed.

Advancement and Obstacles

There has been a fair amount of activity geared toward a better accounting of relations and process in sociology. There are, for example, attempts to generate new social ontologies capable of explaining the mutually influential relationship between individuals and society (and their conceptual analogs), and genres like 'relational sociology,' which intends to shift the focus of sociological thinking from substance to relations, and social network analysis, meant to help conceptualise social life in terms of structures of relationships.

Despite these efforts, a manner of thinking and conducting research conducive to the examination of dynamic social relations has not taken hold in sociology and is not discernible in wider circles of social thought. Grand ontological projects tend to be unwieldy, characterised by unique and extensive vocabularies and convoluted prose. A relational paradigm 'remains largely unknown and generally misconstrued, if not totally rejected' (Donati 2011: 25), with sociology continuing to focus on either individuals or some version of social 'wholes' (Crossley 2011). And social network analysis exhibits problems familiar in sociological theory. Seeking the origins of causation in social structures and not individuals (Marin and Wellman 2011: 13), it retains the dualism that has long plagued sociological thought. Moreover, it has proven difficult to incorporate agency into the network model (Snijders 2011: 505) and the concept is limited in its ability to explain change.

There are, however, deeper problems hindering a relational-process shift in sociology. Accompanying the correct observation that human social phenomena occupy a distinct level of reality, is often the incorrect conclusion that one need look no further than the level of 'social facts' to understand and explain them. Many of sociology's difficulties, Norbert Elias argues, derive from the failure to fully situate itself among the sciences on whose knowledge it depends. This leaves sociology's subject matter 'without ontological status, without anchorage in the observable world...left hanging in the air' (Elias 1991a: 43). With this as a starting point, attempts to comprehend and explain the basics of human social life are bound for a dead end, from which one must place one's bets on either 'the individual' or some imagined supra-individual entity as causal agent. 'Although overtly dualistic,' Anthony King observes, contemporary social theory 'immanently operates with a social ontology in which society consists of social relations between humans' (2004:84).

Without firm footing in the common ground of empirical knowledge about people and the world, however, theory has spun off in a multitude of seemingly disparate directions, creating a vicious cycle in which ever-expanding pluralism makes it increasingly difficult to see, much less get beyond, the supposed impasse. 'In order to set sociology on its feet,' King argues, 'it is necessary to elucidate and illuminate this social ontology [of relations]' (2004: 84), a difficult task armed with inappropriate concepts.

Some of sociology's greatest challenges are related to ongoing efforts to understand the relationship between 'individual and society' and its correlates — identified as *the* driving question of contemporary sociology (Calhoun 2007: 4; Elliott 1999: 7; Elliot and Ray 2003: xiii-xiv; Ritzer 2008: 500). The failure to satisfactorily resolve this question reflects the difficulties sociologists have had grasping the nature of people and the societies they form together, conceptualising relationships among different levels of analysis, and

understanding the mechanisms of social change. The trouble lies, in part, with inherited structures of speech and thought that emphasise substantives appearing to be in a state of rest, with action being indicated by the verbs which follow, as Elias explains in *What is Sociology?* He argues that the conceptual distinctions drawn (even if involuntarily) between actor and activity, structures and processes, and especially between objects and relationships are 'extremely restricting when we are trying to understand human networks' (1978: 113).

Despite some efforts to exorcise qualities of independence and stasis from sociological concepts (as in Bourdieu's efforts to portray 'classes' as relations rather than groups), it remains the case that relations and process are not yet implicit in them. This is understandable, Bourdieu acknowledges, because 'the substantialist mode of thinking is easier to adopt and flows more "naturally"' (1989: 16). More adequate concepts, however, are necessary for understanding and communicating about social phenomena, and such concepts cannot be developed or understood without a firm grasp of how social phenomena fit in the real world. A vicious cycle involving the relationship between *how* we think and the concepts we think *with* is at work here. We have the crucial ingredients to build a better framework and thus to break this cycle; we need only put them together in a more useful way. The first step is to situate sociology and its subject matter among other sciences and theirs.

Sociology's *Relative* Autonomy

In considering the stuff of the universe, Elias works out the implications of its arrangement at physical, biological, and social levels. Of primary importance are the facts that phenomena at different levels exhibit distinct forms of integration and disintegration (e.g., the concepts of life and death apply to biological phenomena but not to purely physical processes), and they display different patterns of order and disorder, kinds of connectedness, and types of structure and function. Consequently, investigating phenomena at one level requires a somewhat different approach than investigating phenomena at another level. The failure to fully acknowledge and incorporate this basic reality into disciplinary pursuits, Elias argues, is at the core of sociology's difficulties. Among them, is 'the uncritical and often dogmatic application of categories and concepts highly adequate in relation to problems on the level of matter and energy to other levels of experience and among them to that of social phenomena' (Elias 1956: 238). Lieberson and Lynn observe this problem still, arguing that an exceptionally inappropriate model of natural science, derived from classical physics, is 'deeply ingrained in sociology and other social sciences' (2002: 2). Granting that this approach (what they call 'social physics')can be a useful part of social scientific inquiry, Clark and York are concerned about the failure of practitioners to at least acknowledge its limitations (2007).

A related consequence of failing to consult and take seriously scientific knowledge as it relates to humans is the ongoing compulsion to speculate about the human condition. The difficulties in sociological theorising can, in large part, be attributed to the diverse assumptions at play in sociology about human nature (Allan 2011). While there remain numerous questions to explore and debate, the fact is that we know a great deal about universal human physiological, psychological and social needs and traits. A more thorough integration of that knowledge into sociological thinking could not but contribute to a firmer theoretical foundation.

Elias offers a model depicting relations among the sciences and their subject matter(see 1987: 151). Ordered according to the degree of 'structuredness' (i.e., the balance between the relative independence and interdependence of the constituent parts under investigation), it depicts highly structured systems and processes, which include components with their own subordinate systems and processes. With this, Elias shows that the sciences do not 'simply exist side-by-side without any order,' which is the impression given by the terms 'natural sciences' and 'social sciences' (2009: 196). Rather, acknowledging the interrelated parts

and processes — the various levels of which comprise the subject matter of different sciences — reminds us that knowledge about phenomena at 'lower' levels of structuredness is indispensable for understanding subject matter at 'higher' levels, and also that the latter cannot be reduced to or explained in the same terms used to explain the former. [1] [#N1] Such a model makes clear that 'society' is neither a kind of superorganism nor does it occupy a separate and wholly autonomous sphere — facts that, even if known, are difficult to articulate without explicit recognition of certain knowledge about what underlies human society.

Social phenomena and the sciences that study it are *relatively* autonomous. While it is clear that sociology's subject matter is distinct, it is related to (and thus its theories must account for and be commensurate with) scientific knowledge about humans. From sociological observation supported by that knowledge, we can derive some fundamental premises, long absent in sociology.

Sociology's Premises

The following premises express verifiable facts about humans and human social life:

- *Humans are biological organisms*, dependent on and interacting with the biophysical contexts within which they develop.

- *Humans are social organisms*, embedded and developing within patterns of relations of interdependence.

- *Human brains are exceptionally dynamic*, having evolved to rely more on social learning than on inherited instincts. People not only *can* learn, but *must* learn from others in order to survive and develop normally. Beyond certain universal tendencies, their neural networks are being constantly configured and re-configured in the contexts of varying experiences and circumstances.

- *Human persons are dynamic*. While they exhibit apparent stability at some levels, their lifelong capacity for learning and responding to experiences in novel ways renders them always open to change.

- *Patterns of humans' interdependent relations are dynamic*. While they exhibit apparent stability at some levels, their characteristics vary according to the people that comprise them and the conditions within which they operate and thus remain always open to change.

While these premises may seem so obvious as to not require statement, they are made neither explicit nor implicit in the discipline. If they (and their implications) were widely appreciated, one might expect to see adjacent areas of inquiry integrated into sociological training, much like chemistry students can expect to learn some physics and biology students can expect to learn chemistry. As it stands, there is no comparable expectation apparent in sociology. A survey of undergraduate and graduate sociology programs reveals that students are typically not required to study human evolution, human-environment relations, or anything about the brain. Nor is minimal exposure to the fundamentals of these the norm, as evidenced in introductory texts, the most common form of encountering the discipline. In twelve popular texts I recently had cause to examine, sociology is portrayed in isolation from other human sciences. [2] [#N2] The word 'biology' appears in the indices of five of the texts. Four of those mentions are solely to differentiate biological from sociological explanations of social phenomena while one discussed their 'interaction'. 'Psychology' appears in the indices of four books, in all cases *only* to distinguish psychological from sociological explanations of deviance and gender. *None* of the books include index entries for 'neuro-' or even 'brain'.

Without exposure to some of the crucial processes that underlie it, one cannot expect to develop a clear understanding of human social life. While some sociologists engage seriously with knowledge from adjacent

human sciences, (e.g., Lenski: ecology and genotype; Turner and Maryanski: biological evolution; Massey: cognitive neuroscience), it is by no means the norm. Environmental sociologist, John Bellamy Foster, observes that avoidance of the concept of nature remains not only a general tendency in sociology, but one of its defining features, mostly 'out of fear of sociobiology'(2002: 56–57). The emergence of environmental sociology itself (a response to the perceived absence of systematic attention to the biophysical contexts within which humans and their societies develop) is a manifestation of the absence of clear premises like those outlined above.

Despite a great deal of growth and vibrant research activity over the past thirty years, environmental sociology remains marginal in the discipline and has not yet 'arrived' (Buttel 2002), especially as measured by its original goal of fundamentally reorienting the discipline and its theory toward recognising the centrality of the biophysical (Pellow and Brehm 2013). The obstacles that environmental sociology's founders faced in confronting the human exemptionalist paradigm, he concludes, are still with us, and have hardly decreased over 25 years. The real tragedy, though, in making relationships between humans and non-human nature peripheral rather than central, is sociology's compromised capacity 'to explain many things that will happen in and to human societies' (Catton 1994:86). Desperately needed insights into many pressing issues depend on improving this capacity.

Making sociology's premises more explicit would go a long way toward redressing some of its problems, especially accounting for biophysical contexts and mechanisms of social change. As Elias reminds us, the 'complexity of many modern sociological theories is due not to the complexity of the field of investigation which they seek to elucidate, but to the kind of concepts employed' (1978: 111).

More Adequate Concepts

In acknowledging humans' inherent sociality and the foundations of people's simultaneous stability and dynamism, the need for more satisfactory concepts rises to the fore. More than that, though, sociology's premises help us make better sense of the alternatives we already have at our disposal: habitus and figurations. More suitable than 'individual', habitus refers to one's socially-conditioned, and thus shared, 'second nature'. It has a long history, but Elias and Bourdieu similarly employ the term to avoid the implication of static, independent, closed individuals. Figuration, introduced by Elias, refers to empirically observable relations of functional interdependence among people and comprises an important part of the conditions within which habitus develops. I discuss them below in the effort to clarify the terms and how they fit within a general theoretical framework of human social processes.

Habitus

As biologically social organisms who rely on learning meanings and skills from others to survive, mature and make our way in the world, we develop a system of schemas that organises our perceptions and generates (in Bourdieu's words) classifiable practices and products — that is, that which we produce and do, including thoughts, perceptions, expressions, actions and *ways* of doing, perceiving, and classifying. Although expressed uniquely by unique persons, habitus refers to the social (and thus shared) level of this system of schemas.

The capacity of habitus to engender such 'products' is endless, but limited in that it reflects the historical and social conditions in which it develops. The concept, Bourdieu argues, helpfully dispels the illusion of the spontaneous generation of people's dispositions — revealing how those dispositions 'vary in a necessary way

according to their...conditions of production' (Bourdieu 1984: 99–101) — but *also* accounts for our capacity for novelty and for changes in those conditions. As embodied history, habitus is conditioned by the circumstances within which we develop and live *and* is the source of our infinite, albeit limited, creative capacity. Despite this allowance, Bourdieu's treatment of habitus has evoked criticism of determinism and fatalistic social reproduction (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 79; Crossley 2001; King 2000; Sewell 1992). While their vigilance is commendable, the problem with this criticism is that it implies an overly simplistic understanding of 'reproduction' as a kind of static replication. In fact, certain societal patterns do get reproduced, making for a certain degree of social stability, but reproduction does not preclude change.

Sexual reproduction allows for the continuation of a species and is also the primary source of diversity and innovation. Likewise, 'social reproduction' need not connote a deterministic duplication of the same conditions and people. While ways of being in the world are passed on and in some ways durable, individuals' capacity for novelty and other fluctuating conditions ensure not only that things are never reproduced in exactly the same way, but also that societal patterns change (albeit at highly variable rates).

> [Habitus'] infinite yet strictly limited generative capacity is difficult to understand only so long as one remains locked in the usual antinomies [...] Because the habitus is an infinite capacity for generating products — thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions — whose limits are set by the historically and socially situated conditions of its production, the conditioned and conditional freedom it provides is as remote from creation of an unpredictable novelty as it is from simple mechanical reproduction of the original conditioning' (Bourdieu 1990: 55).

In a scientifically-grounded sociology, this is not at all paradoxical.

Recent advances in our understanding of the mechanisms for social learning and cultural development provide an empirical basis for, and enrich our understanding of, habitus. Accumulating evidence in research on brain plasticity and mirror neurons, for example, suggests answers to questions about which an isolated sociology can only speculate. We know, for example, that human brains, and thus human learning, are malleable to an extraordinary degree. Ironically, this plasticity is implicated in the creation of stable and sometimes rigid patterns, but what manifests as relative stability at one level involves constant change at another.

Some confusion is understandable, given the challenging prose of the concept's main proponent [3] [#N3] and the consequent diversity of interpretations and uses of the term. The main source of the difficulty, though, is that the concept has not traditionally been understood in the context of a *relatively* autonomous sociology. In the context of supporting scientific knowledge, this is much less of a problem. The habitus process is not reducible to chemical, biological, or neurological processes, but understanding the interactions in and among them greatly enhances our ability to grasp the nature of habitus: 'an open system of dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 132–133). While countless processes underlie habitus, it is a (*relatively* autonomous) system operating at the social level.

Rather than the 'black box' that some have accused habitus of being (see Jenkins 1991), it is merely a useful referent for the system of mechanisms and processes (via subordinate systems of mechanisms and processes) through which social learning orients our perceptions, thoughts and practices. In short, developing and expressing a habitus is what human social organisms do, much like the mind is, in Steven Pinker's words, 'what the brain does' (1997: 24). A habitus is no more an independent entity than the mind is a thing

independent of the brain and its processes. And its development is shaped by, among other things, the nature of the patterns of relations of interdependence, or figurations.

Figurations

Elias chose the term figuration to loosen the constraints that coerce us into thinking about individuals and societies as different and antagonistic. Given the fact that humans are social organisms with needs that universally involve the fulfillment of certain functions (the dynamic multi-perspectival purposes people serve for, and have the ability to withhold from, one another) via relations with others. As such, we naturally have valencies — points of openness for connecting with others. Acknowledging these valencies, the concept of figuration conveys the inherent relationality of human life, and refers simultaneously to the patterns of relations of functional interdependence *and* the patterning itself.

Figurational patterns vary widely, but there are universal human needs in response to which certain bonds of functional interdependence form. Elias identifies three categories of functions aimed at meeting these general needs (1978). Survival and development functions involve, for example, resource procurement, protection, learning and communication (language, knowledge, skills and so on), and more. Sexual functions involve the expression and management of sexual activities and reproduction. And bonds serving our emotional functions derive from the other-directedness we retain and express, albeit not bound by the rigid models of other-directed behaviour apparent in non-human societies. Forms of emotional bonds vary with the size of figurations. It is important to note that symbols can also be a medium to and through which humans bond, and emotional attachments to larger social units via symbols can be just as intense as direct interpersonal bonds.

The term brings dynamic interdependent relations to the forefront, thereby avoiding the need to 'add them'. Beyond the conceptual advantages, figurational thinking illuminates avenues for empirical research. As the patterns of functional bonds between people at a given time, figurations are observable. Those of small groups are more directly comprehensible, whereas larger figurations — with longer and more differentiated chains of interdependence — must be perceived more indirectly, through an analysis of their characteristics. Especially important are differentiation (the numbers and range of functions represented); degree of integration (the number of levels through which functions are coordinated and distributed); power ratios among the bonds (the degrees to which parties are capable of exercising constraint over each other, sometimes by withholding that which others need or want); and rates of change in all of these (Elias 1978: 128–145).

Supported by empirical knowledge about humans and human needs, figurations can be understood as natural products of human social processes. As the ongoing products of decisions and actions people make in relation to the decisions and actions of others, they cannot be controlled by any one individual nor understood via the examination of individual behaviours alone. They *can*, however, be better understood to help people more effectively orient themselves in the world and understand processes of social change and stability in useful ways. Because the conditions at any given moment are chronologically and otherwise dependent on the accumulated circumstances of past moments, change *does* exhibit a kind of order discernible in long-term trends. It is the overall direction of these trends — comprised by pockets of activity both in and counter to that direction — which is important to perceive and which a figurational analysis can help explain. [4] [#N4]

The concept of figuration represents significant advancement in sociology. A growing secondary literature indicates an increasingly widespread recognition of the importance of Elias and figurational sociology (Morrow 2009). Quilley and Loyal have proposed that Elias's figurational approach 'provides a compelling framework for a "central theory" in sociology' (2005: 810). Advocacy of Elias' work is characterised by a sense

that it 'has the capacity to re-orientate the discipline' and is a 'first step in achieving a genuine "empirical-theoretical" understanding of society' (Rojek 2012: 383, 384).

Despite the strength of these convictions, at present the promise of the concept of figurations goes mostly unfulfilled. It has not been taken up in any significant way in common parlance, in general sociological circles, nor even among sociological theorists (at least not in the United States). In the fourteen contemporary theory texts I could locate, only four mention Elias; of those only two contain the word 'figuration'. Rojek suggests that, despite the many good ideas figurational sociology presents, 'it lacks an effective marketing department that can communicate effectively with doubting Thomases, not only in the discipline of Sociology, but in society at large' (2012: 385). Despite the value of the concept that 'puts the problem of human interdependencies into the very heart of sociological theory' (Elias 1978: 134), there has not been a practical way to package and deliver it widely. Given the rapid increase in global human interdependence and the emerging consequences of that for our collective fate, figurational thinking is more necessary than ever.

The Package: A General Model for (Figurational) Sociology

Attempting to create a general theoretical framework to guide the study of human societies is no small task, but is, as Lenski notes, 'essential, both as a guide to research and as an aid in the interpretation of our otherwise fragmented store of information' (2005:76). Lenski's model (2005: 76), along with Massey's (2005:7), are among the efforts that stand out as exemplary in this regard. They attune our attention to: genetic properties of human populations, characteristics of the biophysical environment, population, technology, ideology, social organisation, and more, while also including change over time and system feedbacks. These and other attempts to draw a more comprehensive picture have greatly enhanced my own (ever-developing) understanding of human social processes. Given the endless possibilities for significant 'factors' that might be added to such a model, however, my approach is to zoom out further to derive a maximally parsimonious framework capable of encompassing the endless variety of relevant phenomena. Supported by a figurational approach, the highly general model discussed below (see Figure 1) portrays the fundamental patterns of social life as they can be understood according to the evidence at hand.

In brief, *biophysical conditions* underlie all human activity. It is within these conditions that people develop certain kinds of *figurations*, the patterns of bonds of functional interdependence through which they seek to meet their needs and wants. Developing within particular figurational 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 figurational patterns continue to develop, and so on.
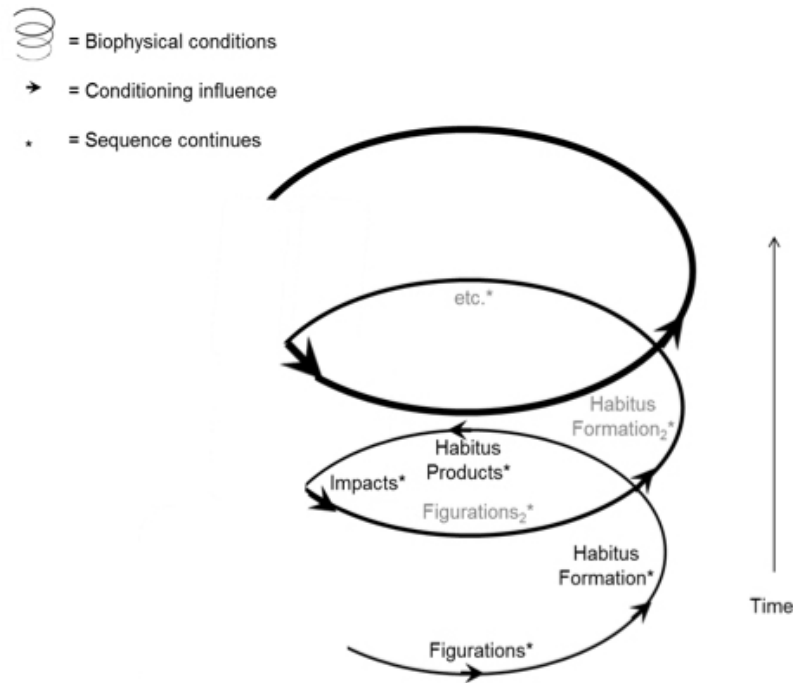
[/h/humfig/images/11217607.0003.104-00000001.jpg]

Figure 1. General figurational model of human social processes

Note: This model was originally inspired by Bourdieu's model of habitus (see Kasper 2013), but has been substantially modified over time in response to my developing understanding of figurations, habitus, and the scientific evidence that elucidates them

The model is intended to sensitise us to and help us visualise relationships among the various 'parts' of the process and the respective parts and processes underlying them. Although the components are arranged in a certain sequence according to the contingencies of the conditions that necessarily precede them, there is a great deal going on simultaneously (as perceived within increments of time meaningful to humans) with each layer of the spiral representing an undefined 'moment' in time. At a high level of synthesis, this model of social life represents enormous complexity — with each element, and the layers that underlie them, comprised of countless interdependent relations and processes. The basic pattern is easy to grasp, but the components within it warrant further elaboration.

Biophysical Conditions

This category comprises the substrate in which all social activity necessarily occurs. Biophysical conditions are reflected by the spiraling line underlying *all* other parts and processes in the model. These include a wide range of interrelated conditions, from those that are fixed (e.g., the laws of physics, chemical processes) to those that are relatively fixed over time periods meaningful to humans (e.g., atmospheric composition, species characteristics) to those that are more open to change, to varying degrees (e.g., species population, the built environment, available resources, tools and technologies). Biophysical conditions influence and (many of them) are influenced by human activities, though at varying scales of space and time. Some of the effects occur locally and/or are manifest in the short term, while others do not become apparent in immediate locales and/or for longer periods of time. Writ large, these are the conditions within which humans form, exercise and re-form certain patterns of bonds of functional interdependence, that is, figurations.

Figurations

Figurations are the ongoing result of humans' reliance on others to provide what they need (whether in visible material form, or in the form of information and meanings) to survive and develop. In modern societies they are far-reaching and highly complex, so much so that investigations of them tend to specialise in particular kinds of bonds (e.g., economic, political, familial and so on). Although we have come to see these as separate realms of activity, rather than different kinds of function in the web of human interdependence, the concept of figuration applies to the study of any of these. Figurational patterns are modified (whether consciously or not) in response to changes in: biophysical conditions; perceptions, knowledge, and other 'products'; and habitus. Whatever the topic under investigation, the concept encourages the awareness that changes in relations of interdependence imply changes for actual people and the kinds of habitus they develop.

Habitus Formation

Within similar figurational circumstances, people develop a socially conditioned way of being in the world, or habitus, that is recognisably similar to those developing within like conditions. The concept of habitus makes clear that individuality and social relatedness are not only not antithetical, but that it is only possible for one to achieve individuality growing up within a social group. What Elias says about self-control is true for self-development, in general, that 'the whole structure [...] both conscious and unconscious, is a network product formed in a continuous interplay of relationships to other people, and that the individual form of the adult is a society-specific form' (Elias 1991b: 26–27). The mechanisms of a person's habitus formation are not necessarily within the purview of sociology, but they are important to understand and include here. Elias reminds us that while we can '*distinguish* between research into [interdependent] people in the singular and research into [interdependent] people in the plural,' in other words, between psychology and sociology, it is 'impossible to *separate* them' (1978: 125). One of sociology's tasks is to characterise habitus through observation of the 'products' it generates.

Habitus Products

Simply put, this broad category involves that which we make and do relevant to the expression of a particular habitus, including the organisation of all that into an overall lifestyle. Bourdieu mentions thoughts, perceptions, expressions, actions and works as the 'products' of human life that are oriented by habitus. With reference to 'action theories', and their bias toward directly visible physical activities, Elias argues for an emphasis on actions which, though not directly observable, are nevertheless accessible to human observation. A figurational sociology, he maintains, would pay attention to the '"experiential", thinking, feeling, drive aspects of humans' (1987: 115–116). At multiple levels, the products of human activities have consequences for other people and for biophysical conditions (which may also mediate subsequent impacts).

Impacts

Impacts of sociological interest may occur in a wide range of distances and time scales. Wherever and whenever they manifest, they shape the conditions within which humans continue to form and exercise figurational patterns — ultimately contributing to their reinforcement and change. Although a full demonstration of the framework's application is beyond the scope of this paper, below I summarise its advantages and briefly discuss an example that illustrates its utility and value.

Putting this Theoretical-Empirical Framework to Use

For all of the valuable insights provided by Elias, Bourdieu, and other relational-process oriented theorists, one is hard-pressed to know what to *do* with them. Recalling his own first encounter with *What is Sociology?,* Stephen Mennell acknowledges that 'the models were not exactly a "theory" as conventional sociologists would understand the term but [...] they served as "aids to a sluggish imagination"'(Mennell 2006: 76). Such stimulants are wonderful, but the idiosyncratic nature of students' exposure to and interpretations of them are part of what has made for persistent incoherence in sociological theory.

Striving to be faithful to Elias' figurational insights and to make them more widely accessible and useable, I offer the model above to symbolically represent 'the dynamic of every social present as it extends beyond itself and thus becomes the past' (Elias 1997: 371), but also to facilitate comprehension and explanation of societal development (and the ongoing exchange between unplanned and planned processes). This framework brings several benefits.

First, it is a vehicle for organising and conveying sociological theory. Rather than conventional designation by classical/contemporary, major 'perspective', or authors' name, works of theory (and particular aspects of them) can be usefully organised according to their concern with: relations of interdependence (e.g., division of labor, relations of production); habitus formation (e.g., the 'I' and the 'me', phenomenology); the products of habitus (e.g., the Protestant ethic, blasé attitude); the impacts of those products (e.g., suicide, land use) and/or their effects on figurational development and change (e.g., mechanical and organic solidarity, globalisation). Also, with reference to established knowledge, it precludes the need for a new and complicated ontology to explain the role of 'the environment' to account for agency, or to reflect the simultaneous reality of social stability and change. Ideas put forth, however, must be commensurate with them. In this way, compatibility with underlying knowledge serves a kind of first test of a theory. Finally, a broader view of things and the general categories of questions it highlights reveals meaningful connections among seemingly disparate inquiries and findings, and can guide inquiry and hypothesis-formation at widely varying levels of analysis.

- What are the characteristics of the figurations in question?

- How does habitus form differently in different kinds of figurations?

- What sorts of products do certain types of habitus generate?

- What impacts do those products have on people and the world?

- How do/could those impacts affect subsequent development of the figurations in question?

These are especially important for the exploration of big, complex issues that span multiple disciplines.

Climate Change, For Example

Urgent calls for innovative and actionable social science are steadily being issued from within climate change research, an area that spans a wide range of disciplines. We already know a great deal about the relevant biophysical conditions and impacts (e.g., fossil fuel use, greenhouse gases, rising average temperatures, moister air, rising sea levels, increases in vector-borne illness and so on). We also understand the origins of many of these impacts in the 'products' of certain kinds of habitus and figurations (e.g., affluent lifestyles, particular consumption and production practices, worldview, the organisation of human settlements and more). Based on the evidence, one thing is clear. Significant changes in societal organisation are likely imminent. Whether they be thoughtful and proactive (as in concerted efforts to reduce greenhouse gas

emissions) or reactive and out of necessity (as in responding to abrupt changes in conditions created by a shifting global climate), the recognition that changing circumstances require major transitions is fuelling the demand for a better understanding of social change processes. Sociologists, themselves, are making the same plea.

In November 2012, a listserv sponsored by the Environment and Technology section of the American Sociological Association was host to a spirited conversation about dangerous levels of anthropogenic climate interference — how to understand it and what to do about it. At its conclusion was the observation that there is, as yet, no viable theory of social change. Sociologist Robert Brulle declared that 'it is incumbent on sociologist[s] to help identify the opportunities for a real theory of transformation. ' A means for understanding social change is requisite to comprehending the world and our own lives in it, but also for effecting and steering particular kinds of transitions and navigating changing conditions.

In a recent review of the literature, Shove points out that sociology's engagement with climate change tends to be preoccupied with nature, culture, and capitalism, which reflects more about itself and internal debates than about the subject. Climate change is, she observes, a problem:

> the scale and character of which calls for really new ways of thinking. Meanwhile, climate change policy proceeds on the basis of an extraordinarily limited understanding of the social world', with social science inquiry dominated by green consumerism and the relations between environmental beliefs and action (Shove 2010a: 278).

The kinds of questions we need to answer require a more accurate sense of the relationship between social practices and societal transitions, and call for new ways of integrating micro, meso, and macro levels of inquiry, an agenda with enormous potential. The real challenge for social scientists, says Shove, 'is to contain and handle the many tracks of enquiry that spin out from this approach' (2010a: 283). The figurational theory proposed is well-suited to help.

Although the problem is well-understood and, in principle, we already know what to do about it, we do not yet understand how to mobilise the social mechanisms to do what it appears we must to preserve a familiar and livable planet. Most encouraging is that there are so many capable people on the job. The literature is bursting with efforts to understand these problems and to answer the challenges they pose. Unfortunately, excessive specialisation within and between disciplines — especially in theories, terminology and methods — has created barriers to communication and collaboration. The result is a sprawling selection of approaches for conceptualising the social side of climate change, with no clear means for them to inform one another.

On the one hand is an emphasis on individual behaviour, with the number of models intended to explain and predict it proliferating to such a degree that environmental behaviour researchers have no way of knowing which model to choose (Bamberg and Schmidt 2003). Moreover, behaviour research has diverse and disparate theoretical underpinnings, and overviews of them, [5][#N5] however useful, offer no indication of how or whether the theories connect or how to choose from among them. On the other hand, there is a comparable focus on top-down fixes via technology and policy, with ongoing tension between the two approaches (Shwom and Lorenzen 2012). The oft-made recommendation that policymakers should consider all perspectives has limited practical value.

In the face of the now constant and overwhelming flow of highly diverse and often specialised information, the radically simplified figurational framework proposed is an appropriate response and useful tool for organising and making optimal use of climate-relevant research questions, approaches and findings from

across the disciplinary spectrum. Attending to their emphases on figurational patterns, habitus formation processes, the products of habitus expression, their impacts, and real or likely changes in figurational patterns, the proposed model helps to contextualise — and thus sensibly connect — these works and/or various aspects of a single project. Below are the results of a small and initial test of this assertion.

Examining the results of a database search of recently published climate change research, I check whether the projects (titles paraphrased) can be usefully situated within the model (see Figure 2, words and phrases indicating the paper's primary focus, and relation to a particular aspect of the model, are in bold).My initial finding is that the model functions as a tool to organise the incredibly diverse research relevant to climate change.
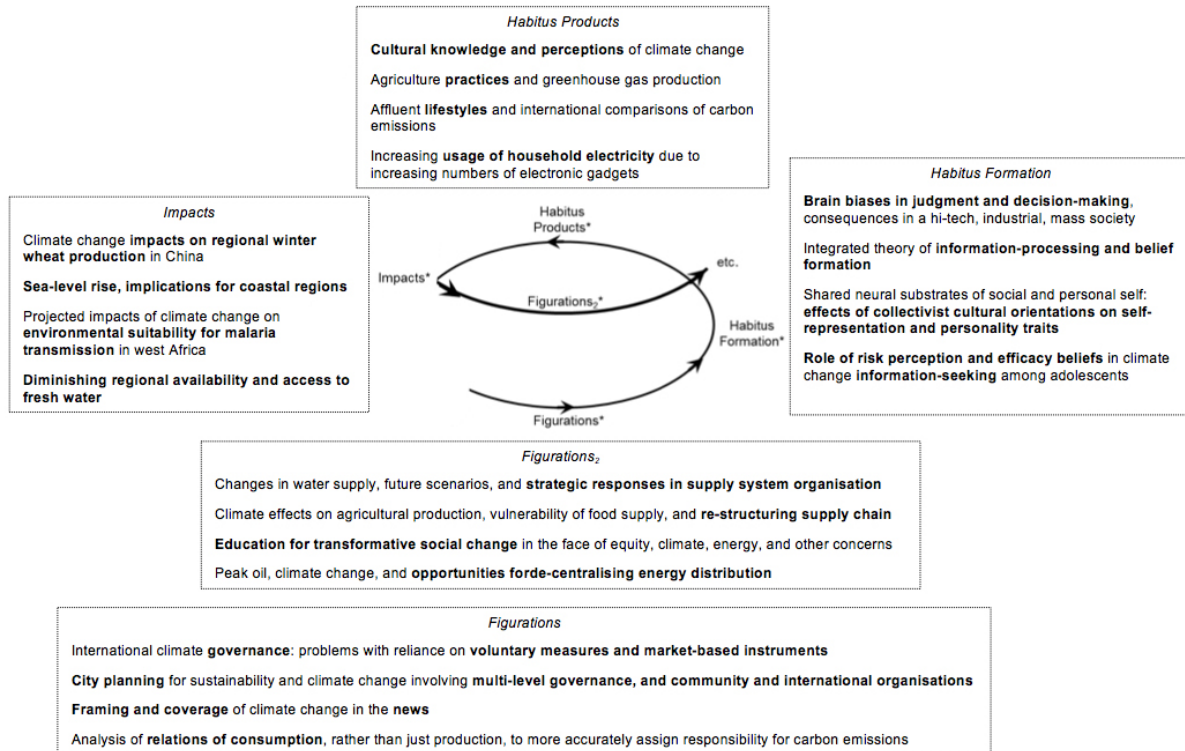
[/h/humfig/images/11217607.0003.104-00000002.jpg]

Figure 2. Examples of current climate change-related research situated in the proposed framework

While very preliminary, this test offers some sense of the potential of relating otherwise seemingly unconnected research within a wholly different kind of framework, that is, one not organised explicitly by discipline. The sense it provides of the relations among the basic aspects of the flow of social processes allows researchers to identify the aspects with which their work is most concerned. This, in turn, usefully illuminates (in ways that disciplinary parameters cannot) some of the ways their research is informed by or informs work concerned with other aspects of that flow. In this sense, it can help redress the difficulties faced by social scientists 'who are keen to contribute to climate-change policy but who do not fit the [attitude, behaviour, choice] mould' and 'at the same time make better use of a much wider range of intellectual resources'(Shove 2010b: 1281).

More thorough applications of the figurational theory codified here remain to be explored and tested. There is, no doubt, ample room for critique and refinement, but this effort is meant to be a practical step toward 'figuring out how to collaborate across disciplines that use very different methods' (Palmer 2012: 5) and

engaging 'all of the social sciences in multidisciplinary research — with each other and biophysical sciences' (Moran 2010: 22).

Conclusion

The interest in developing a central theory that can facilitate communication and research about human social processes is important for sociology's advancement, but is not merely academic. Patterns of human social relations have become increasingly complicated and difficult to see, let alone understand the consequences of, in our contemporary highly differentiated and globalised systems.

> The task of sociological research is *to make these blind, uncontrolled processes more accessible to human understanding* by explaining them, and to enable people to orientate themselves within the interwoven social web—which, though created by their own needs and actions, is still opaque to them—and so better to control it (Elias, 1978: 153-154, italics original).

Echoing Elias, Chomsky observes that 'the need for adequate orientation in the social world is great', and notes the lack of accomplishments among the social sciences in this regard (in Goudsblom1977: 202–03). This failure is not due to their being too deep and complicated, he adds, but to a lack of synthesis among the writings intended to contribute to a greater orientation.

Our general failure to recognise the ways in which we are engaged in relations of functional interdependence with others has resulted in some highly destructive behaviours, creating problems at a global scale. Meaningfully dealing with them will require prudent actions informed by careful investigation and a hard-won understanding of the problems and their origins from all angles. Increasing recognition of this has catalyzed a call for greater cooperation among disciplines (Fischer et al 2012; Moran 2010; Palmer 2012) and the more explicit involvement of social scientists (Smith 2009; Tahir 2009; Zax 2009). 'The work on human dimensions,' Moran says, 'links the biological, physical, and social sciences, thereby making social sciences centrally important' (Moran 2010: 21). Indispensable for this kind of cross-fertilisation and cooperation, Elias instructs, is 'an integrating central theory of society' (2009: 67). A figurational approach, supported by scientific knowledge and complemented by the concept of habitus are a huge step forward in that regard.

Entering the online discussion with a different perspective, one environmental advocate asks:

> What would you [sociologists] do if you knew your work was essential for helping us address climate change and other huge environmental issues?[...] The sociological questions embedded in that are daunting. Consider this a plea for help for those of us dancing furiously on the precipice of the future (Raffensperger 2012).

And dance we do. '[B]ut no one will imagine a dance as a structure outside the individual or as a mere abstraction [...] without a plurality of reciprocally orientated and dependent individuals, there is no dance' (Elias 2000: 482). Embracing a figurational sociology — and the concepts and knowledge on which it rests — would help us develop a more accurate sense of who we are and what we are doing together. With that, perhaps we can sustain a greater awareness of our collective dance and more intentionally lead the direction of its movement, rather than mindlessly letting it carry us over the cliff.

Biography

Debbie Kasper is a sociologist in the interdisciplinary Environmental Studies department at Hiram College in Ohio, USA. There, she teaches and does sociological theory and environmental sociology, among other things. Her teaching and scholarship generally aim to foster a clearer sense of humans' place in the world and an understanding of the formation and consequences of social practices. She is particularly interested in the development of 'normal', especially the perceptions and practices that characterise everyday life, their socio-environmental impacts, and the processes by which they change.

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Notes

1. Using DNA as an example, Elias illustrates how advances in one science are contingent upon those in the sciences "below" it. One could not, he says, work out a model of a DNA molecule without information about what it contains, what its parts do, what their properties are, and how they behave. Knowledge about the parts gained through chemical analysis was indispensable but auxiliary to the main task of building an integrated model (Elias 2009a: 81). Recognising the contingency of scientific discovery within the context of relations among the sciences provides valuable insight into delays in sociology's advancement. An empirically verifiable understanding of humans' inherent sociality, for instance, depended on the development of biological knowledge about social organisms and the roles genetics and evolution play in that. Also crucial have been developments in neuroscience and psychology that help us understand humans' unique capacities for non-evolutionary change. It is equally true, however, that

knowledge about genetics, evolutionary mechanisms, and the human brain is insufficient to explain social phenomena. ⬆ [#N1-ptr1]

2. These are from a non-random sample of texts published in the past 10 years. Wanting an even mix of well-established standards (i.e., dubbed "best-selling" or "very successful") and of books marketed as "innovative," "unique," or explicit deviations from the norm, I examined six in each category. ⬆ [#N2-ptr1]

3. Comprehending the meaning of a given passage often requires multiple readings. This is asking a lot when Bourdieu's longer sentences run to 17 lines (as one does in *Outline*, page 83) and 27 lines (as in *Logic*, page 17)! ⬆ [#N3-ptr1]

4. A prominent example is Elias' use of it to explain certain features of cultural development in western Europe through the development of a habitus that is increasingly inclined toward self-monitoring and self-control, in *The Civilizing Process*. ⬆ [#N4-ptr1]

5. The European Commission's 'Future Brief: Green Behaviour' and Kollmus and Agyeman (2002) are two examples. ⬆ [#N5-ptr1]