

Thinking with Elias using the *Collected Works*

Emilia Sereva, University of Edinburgh

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Abstract

The *Collected Works* of Norbert Elias was completed in 2014, making available the largest collection of Elias's writing in English to date. Although many have used particular aspects of the *Collected Works* in their research, there has not yet been a discussion which has used the entire set. This article explores my using the entire *Collected Works* as a dataset, comments on the particular approach to reading employed in doing so, and details the learning that resulted. Key advantages gained from this approach to using Elias's work are discussed around the example of figuration as this was shaped and became re-shaped in a recent research project.

Keywords: Norbert Elias, *Collected Works*, social theory, reading generously, thinking with theory

Introduction

Prior to publication of the *Collected Works* of Norbert Elias, it was considerably more difficult for English readers [1],[#N1], such as myself to critically engage with and develop an in-depth understanding of Elias's ideas. Since its completion in 2014, there have been further strides in the extension of Eliasian ideas, with many articles, books and doctoral theses drawing on its contents. However, there has not yet been a discussion of using all eighteen volumes as a complete set and so as a kind of dataset. In my recent research (Sereva 2017), I used the *Collected Works* in this way. This experience shows that doing so allows understandings of Elias's work that were not possible before.

In what follows, I first discuss the *Collected Works* overall and the idea of reading it generously, with the 'how' and 'what for' of this being the focus. Following from this, some examples of how my thinking and understanding were changed through this are discussed and also where this has led me in terms of my growing comprehension of what 'thinking with' Elias entails is considered. This relates to my interpretation of what Elias meant in hoping future people might use his ideas in their own ways (Elias 7 June 1952, cited in *Figurations* No. 22, 2004: 20). In particular, I discuss what resulted from avoiding 'applying' Elias's ideas and concepts and instead 'thinking with' Elias, with regard to the example of figuration.

What I did and why

Critics of Elias have themselves been criticised by Mennell and Goudsblom (1997), Liston and Mennell (2009) and others for cherry-picking his work and selecting only things that support their own – usually negative – pronouncements. In relation to this, Heinich points out that 'critics of a work are of interest only insofar as they refer to what has been really written by the author and not to what some readers imagine he wrote, as is

often the case with Elias' (Heinich 2013: 31). The *Collected Works* are a one-stop-shop providing the largest English collection of Elias's writing to date (Flores 2014), [2].[#N2]effectually cancelling any previous excuses for selective reading. This is also an invitation to re/think deeply engrained ideas about Elias's work by exploring it afresh. *The Collected Works* contains new translations of well-known works and also a wide range of newly translated pieces not previously available in English. The editors have in addition provided a rationale for the ordering of the pieces comprising each volume based upon Elias's known intentions and the chronological order of writing and/or publication. The re-ordering, the translations, the new additions and how they fit with older versions, and guidance about the chronology of production, all add up to researchers having a far greater ability to understand more and different things about Elias and what he wanted to convey to readers, once the *Collected Works* are engaged with as a totality.

Anderson, Hughes and Sharrock (1985) propose that sociology has become more of an 'argument subject' than a 'knowledge subject' and that this presents some potential dilemmas. With regards to reading theoretical works, these include comparing a theoretical contribution against another school of thought believed (by the reader) to be more 'correct', imposing the reader's own assumptions about meaning onto this writing and overestimating contemporary (and their own) achievements. To remedy these problematic conventions, they suggest a practice of reading 'charitably' or 'generously' (Anderson et al. 1985: 58, 70). This involves evaluating theories against the provided evidence, avoiding comparisons made by interjecting one's own 'truer' views about the topic, and giving theories the benefit of the doubt in terms of assuming that their arguments and supporting examples are used for good reasons. Reading generously also involves weeding out pre-conceived assumptions made in approaching theoretical arguments. After all, '... before we can properly decide upon the truth of a theory, the fruitfulness of an approach, we must first make sense of it. And, whether a framework makes sense or not has much to do with the effort we are willing to invest in trying to interpret it' (Anderson et al. 1985: 58). At basis, reading generously is a process of evaluating, not what is 'wrong' or missing with a body of work, but whether a theory has satisfactorily achieved what it proposed to do. It rejects critical nit-picking and finding supposed 'mistakes' in favour of deciphering whether the thinker has been successful in achieving a set objective or objectives. This is why I decided to read the whole *Collected Works* as a set.

Reading the *Collected Works* in its entirety gives an opportunity to read Elias's work fairly and generously. The central objective of reading generously is to make sense of theories on their own terms, without imposing an intrusive agenda from elsewhere, from a different kind of theory game (Anderson et al. 1985). In doing so, the reader takes theories seriously, beginning with the assumption that the thinker concerned is correctly doing what they set out to do, and so reading their work with the aim of understanding what they are conveying through their writing. With regard to Elias, the key question concerns what he was intending to convey through his work, both in terms of his big picture ideas and the component concepts which help to compose them. Reading Elias generously is thus a process of learning what his main objectives were, by following his thought processes as they developed over time, and considering whether he was successful in doing what he set out to do. In turn, this led me to consider how his ideas took shape over the course of his work and so over time.

Having the complete eighteen-volume set to hand, I began by reading the new translations of my favourite works and things most relevant to the particular research I was doing. However, I soon came to realise that, when working with Eliasian ideas, it's *all* relevant. I was then struck by the realisation that I now had the majority of his writing available to me. [3].[#N3]Elias has argued that 'the whole is more and different than the sum of its parts' (Elias 2010 [1987]: 13), but the two are inextricably linked and the parts nevertheless contribute to understanding of the whole and vice versa. In this connection, properly understanding a particular concept or theory of Elias's necessitates understanding his overarching objectives and his bigger

picture of social change. Likewise, understanding the whole that is Elias's overarching bigger picture of how it all works necessitates piecing together ideas and conclusions from the theoretical and conceptual investigations composing all of his writing, with great attention to how each facet fits and builds together and also how these assemblages of ideas develop over time. Clearly this notion of things building together over time suggests attending to the temporal order of the writing and publication, so I decided to start at 'the beginning' and to work my way through systematically.

This is in essence what is meant by 'taking it seriously', and reading it like this throws light on Elias's work in a very different way from reading one-off individual works. The details of what was involved was that I read every page of every volume of the *Collected Works*, and I did this following the date order of writing and publication helpfully supplied by the editors. The approximate dates at which Elias wrote each piece and the order in which these were originally published can be very different, while Elias also frequently returned to and re-worked things he had written and published earlier. All three aspects – original writing, publication, reworking – are important to understanding the development of his ideas, and the editors indicate the details and differences wherever possible. It is an understatement that Elias wrote extensively and indeed 'never stopped writing' (Mennell 1990: 154). Reading his work according to the order of original writing, publication and later reworking, it becomes clear that Elias's ideas developed over time in tandem with his changing thinking and a range of other influential factors. How his bigger picture unfolded over the course of his writing life is central, and thus reading in this chronological order helped me to better come to terms with his process of theorising and relatedly how his ideas developed and fitted together over time.

Reading in a temporal order

Ideas do not simply spring into being fully-formed. In a similar way to how Elias describes the over-time formation of a figuration's habitus (Elias 2013 [1989]: 24; Dunning and Mennell 1996: ix), ideas form through a process of accumulation in the way of sedimented layers, building successively upon what existed previously. For example, while ideas about what he would later call figuration were 'there' in his earlier writing about court societies (Elias 2012 [1939], 2006 [1969]), Elias gradually expanded upon these in his examination of gentlemen and seamen and professions (2007), conceptually developed figuration in *What is Sociology?* (2012 [1970]) and continued working with it in the various contexts of his other works including *The Established and the Outsiders* (with John Scotson 2008 [1965]), *Quest for Excitement* (with Eric Dunning 2008 [1986]) and *The Loneliness of the Dying* (2010 [1979]). In short, Elias developed his ideas about figuration through using it over time in different, varying, contextual and above all *accumulating* ways.

Reading Elias's writings in the chronological order he produced them is likewise a process of accumulation. It is to follow in the wake of his intellectual journey, as he little-by-little develops ideas and weaves them together in ways that build upon what came before. The process of following Elias in this way also helped me consider him as a learning, thinking person who changed his mind and developed new uses of concepts and so made sense of shifts of thinking and contextual influences on his ideas.

The benefit of the doubt

In addition to reading Elias's work in a chronological order, I endeavoured at all times to give him the benefit of the doubt. At intervals throughout my reading, some of Elias's arguments or conclusions appeared incorrect or otherwise odd to me. I was making assumptions and interjecting my own meaning rather than endeavouring to understand what *he* meant in these instances. However, with continued reading of his work

and re/thinking what Elias was doing, I found there was a specific rationale for it, and it was me rather than Elias who had missed the point of what he was doing. In addition to endeavouring to maintain a practice of reading generously, I found that consulting the editors' notes and also supplementing my *Collected Works* reading with biographies and video footage of Elias helped me to better understand what was transpiring in his life and the world at large at the time he wrote particular work.

Once I did this, I found that Elias's ideas came with me everywhere. In watching the news or people going about their daily business, for example, I would often ask myself, 'What would Elias say about this?'. Opening a kind of on-going dialogue with Elias's work, I considered his changing responses at different points across his lifetime of writing, and of course I did so by thinking with Elias in the different contexts I engaged with them.

Thinking with Elias

By thinking through my own questions while following the development of Elias's work, I came to adopt a practice of 'thinking with' Elias. That is to say, I did not attempt to apply Eliasian concepts to the subjects of my research. Instead my aim was to extend such concepts through their use in the new contexts, while drawing on the examples Elias provides as reference points illustrating how concepts played out in different scenarios, societies and time periods. I take it that this is what Elias meant when in an interview he said, 'How it goes on from there is a matter for later generations' (Elias 2013 [1984]: 103). In a letter to former student Bryan Wilson, Elias also wrote that, '...one gets insight in a good many things... which one can only hand on... to younger men and women understanding and able enough to take it up and to use it in their own way. That you allowed me to do a little of this handing on made me very happy' (Elias 7 June 1952, cited in *Figurations* No. 22, 2004: 20). My reading of *Interviews and Autobiographical Reflections* likewise suggests Elias hoped people would extend his ideas in unforeseen ways and use his work for their own purposes (Elias 2013). But how does this work in practice?

'Thinking with' Elias invites and requires independent and original thought, in the sense that his conceptual ideas are not and cannot be universally applicable and have to be re-thought in different contexts. Generally speaking, Elias's writing is example-heavy and example-driven, and these examples are illustrations hinting at a more profound bigger picture of 'how it all works'. In short, the examples are case studies highlighting interwoven and interdependent social processes at work in particular societies over the *longue durée*. For Elias, context is important, and so treating his writing as an accumulating store of contextual examples, rather than as a set of rules for application, encourages thoughtful questioning. Although Elias has been criticised for not providing a 'precise method' or framework for applying concepts (Rojek and Turner 2000: 643), there is sufficient indication in Elias's discussion of figuration in *What is Sociology?* (2012 [1970]) and the involvement/detachment balance in *Involvement and Detachment* (2008 [1983]), for example, to conclude that this was deliberate because he wanted process sociologists of the future to think for themselves and to use his work in new contexts. In his lecture transcript, 'Fear of Death', Elias wrote, 'I expect that some of it [ideas] will be adopted and continued in research or artistic work or any other kind of work' (Elias 2008 [1986]: 266). And so rather than providing precise instructions to follow, Elias leaves conceptual discussions open and provides cases illustrating possibilities for use.

In general terms, Elias's examples are case studies that aid in understanding other topics of research inquiry. However, no two cases are exactly the same. Consequently, the key is to use his examples to learn about the range of ways that concepts play out and differ or relate to one another in particular instances at particular times, and then to consider these examples together in building a springboard with which to extend Eliasian

thinking. Here the *Collected Works* is a central player because it provides the largest English compilation of Elias's writing, spanning the course of his lifetime, meticulously compiled and with detailed and helpful comments from the editors about how to frame and contextualise the reading. These are the tools with which to begin thinking with Elias in the new ways made possible by the *Collected Works*.

What I learned

How does one go about discerning social processes in the ways Elias did? As I have noted earlier, the convention is to 'apply' aspects of Elias's own practices in a research design. However, Elias wanted researchers to think for themselves, so I wanted to avoid applying his research approach: put simply, I decided that, 'if Elias did not "apply", why should I?' Generally speaking, all research is grounded in specific contexts. Elias was very alive to the specificities of each context and he did not merely apply the same ideas in exactly the same ways. For example, his analysis of the civilising process in the French court society of Louis XIV is not the same as his analysis of the civilising process of Germany in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Elias's specificity takes into account each nation's particular process of civilising and various layers of habitus specific to the figurations involved in each example. Elias was always thinking with his own concepts and recognising the importance of context, including everything that has happened and is happening in a particular time and place. The temporal axis is a central factor, but things are not all reducible just to the passing of time, because the passing of time is coupled with the specific history: there are different events and different people, and the events and the people make a difference, as do cultural factors.

Thinking with Elias to understand the processes unfolding in the present is also possible. However, where the unfolding present is concerned, although understanding it necessarily involves learning what came before, the present is 'unwritten'. It involves observing from a distance like Elias did with his stacks of historical documents, but this is a different kind of observation. How do people negotiate shared spaces and what processes do their interactions inform about? What connections are there between what I observe and what Elias wrote about? What am I not seeing but is nevertheless present in the context in front of me? Thinking of Elias's examples, are there any connections to be drawn to help understand what is going on? How and in what ways are Elias's examples similar to or different from what I am observing? Elias has discussed the useful example of walking along a city street (Elias 2010 [1987]: 19), which provided me with a good place to begin thinking with Elias about daily life: it its light, I noticed that I pay close attention to how I am moving in relation to others walking near me, and to how other people move. Everyone using the street is connected through shared space. 'Membership' changes over time, although at any given point all of the people present in the street are there for a reason more-or-less shared. Thinking with Elias in daily life is immediately helpful, and this way of thinking is also usefully extended in research contexts.

The example I want to elaborate on concerns how I thought with Elias's concept of figuration in a recent research project (Sereva 2017). This project explored the over-time development of independent funeral directing firms in Britain, and was a departure from many previous process sociological projects in terms of its temporal confines (centring around present-day events and groups) and the methods it employed (unstructured interviews plus observations). [4][#N4] However, these were deliberate choices, because I was foremost interested in whether the unfolding aspects of workplace figurations can be discernible through conversations with their current members, and what over-time developments these people perceive through their ongoing work together. Following from Liston's comments, I am one among the younger generations 'strengthen[ing] the present-centred focus... without ignoring the impact of "the past" on "the present"' (Liston 2011: 166).

In the beginning of thinking with Elias in the context of this research, I found myself reverting to applying his concepts and categorising what I saw and heard. Whenever I noticed I was doing this, however, I returned to the *Collected Works* and read some of Elias's own examples until I could think more clearly. Hughes proposes that '...the real value of his [Elias's] work resides in the model of doing sociology embedded in his approach' (Hughes 2013: para 20). Likewise, I continually reminded myself of how Elias might have operated with regard to my particular research concerns. Having approached the research in this way, I agree with Hughes that Elias's approach 'resides' in the different contexts of each situation written about, but would counter that Elias has not provided a 'model' in the strict sense of the word. Instead, Elias has provided case studies; reading them consecutively and as a set, a pattern emerges which points up how to go about doing sociology the Eliasian way. Considering all the components of the *Collected Works* together, this pattern is:

1. Eliasian concepts do not exist in universal versions, but at all times hinge upon contextual factors.
2. Because every research context is unique on temporal, habitual and figurational levels, theoretical concepts cannot be used in the same ways each time. Research approaches always need to be driven by circumstances, situations and materials to hand, and likewise concepts play out differently according to context.
3. Theoretical concepts are enhanced and enriched through each new context used to explore them. Likewise, each context is an opportunity to extend a concept in new ways and also to learn about potential limitations.

Although there are similarities between my work with independent funeral directors and Elias's examples concerning established-outsiders and professions (Elias 2008 [1990], 2007), I cannot just 'apply' Elias's theoretical conclusions in order to better understand my own research questions. However, I *can* use these examples to aid thinking about my research. In starting to think about how to put Eliasian concepts to work, I was aware that Elias's work comprises theories hinging upon situational specifics with no prescribed methods. As such, it cannot be lifted out and used as-is, so I then considered the relationship between these two terms, 'theory' and 'method' in deciding how best to proceed.

When Silverman and Marvasti (2008) comment that theory and methods should mesh, this implies a separation often exists, with the implied expectation of *matching* [theory A] with [method B]. Elias certainly considered a separation between theory and method to be a false dichotomy, with his lack of a prescribed recipe indicating guidance by the context and the materials to hand. As a result, readers can discern the interdependence of theory and practice across Elias's writing. Reading and re-reading Elias's *Collected Works* in relation to my own research, possibilities for context-tailored approaches became more apparent. Elias (2012 [1970]) disliked sociological research practices that are co-opted from the natural sciences and attempted to be a 'destroyer of myths'. In particular regarding the 'mythical' opposition between theory and method, he demonstrated their interdependence implicitly via his constantly weaving them together.

In the spirit of 'thinking with' rather than 'applying' Elias's ideas, then, a possible remedy to the presupposed disconnection between theory and method begins with using different terms: 'what I think', and 'how I will find out more about what I wish to learn'. These immediately seem more interdependent than [theory] here and [method] there, and this pertains to the point Elias is trying to make and which I have attempted to follow. This point is to allow *theory-and-method* to be guided by learning in the contexts of specific research projects.

Reading the *Collected Works* as a kind of dataset, as entirety, aids in understanding how and in what ways situational specifics and contexts guide theory-and-method in research. Over the course of reading the set in a chronological order, Elias's tactics of interweaving theory and method become clearer as patterns and contextual differences emerge. It also seems that Elias learned from his uses of concepts over time, because in

a number of instances he revisited earlier works and added to them. *The Court Society*, for example, was published with a more recent and clarifying introduction based in what Elias had learned since writing the main text. His context-dependent approach also comes to the fore in the process of reading, and what he learns from each project becomes apparent in reading about subsequent ones. In short, reading Elias's work as a collected and over-time set of case studies helps readers learn about doing process sociology by example. What Elias learned from each of his conceptual uses not only informed about the matters of inquiry, but also helped to further shape the concepts he was using. Thus the 'reading the set' approach to the *Collected Works* gives an opportunity to follow the developments of concepts through use over time and thereby gain a more holistic, and a more processual, understanding of them.

Finding Figuration

Putting Elias's ideas to work, I used them to re/think and to devise ways of using his concept of figuration in exploring how things have unfolded in the present and remembered past for groups of funeral directors and their firms (Sereva 2017: 41–76). Elias (2007 [1983], 2012 [1970], 2009 [1986]) explains that all people are bound together in figurations, and that a person cannot be independent of all figurations. Given my interest in the unfolding qualities of a figuration over time and in learning about how its present members perceive and explain these aspects, the 'who knows whom now' characteristics of figuration are secondary to people's experiences of membership. This is because fixing on a figuration as a kind of membership roster is a trap. In a sense, stopping time and exploring matters concerning membership means that the researcher arrives at understanding a network within a figuration of interest, but the figuration itself remains elusive. This is, among other reasons, because figurational relationships are characterised by qualities which unfold gradually and are not coterminous with network links (Elias 2012 [1970], 2009 [1986], 2006 [1922]). Because my focus was on the present-day unfolding qualities, rather than the long-term and over-time developments, historical texts concerning the funeral industry and profession were not very helpful. Interview-based and observational approaches seemed most practical given my interest was in learning about the experience of figurational membership. Thinking of people as 'figurational members' rather than individuals, I concluded that a useful step was to talk with people in each of several different funeral firms. This had to enable the interpretation of people's accounts in terms of the *homines aperti* by understanding what they said in terms of a 'We-I' rather than an 'I' perspective (Elias 2011 [1989], 2010 [1987], 2007 [1983]). Put simply, I was interviewing and observing people as members of figurations to learn about their varying we-perspectives, rather than recording the 'autonomous' views of individuals.

Although Gabriel and Mennell argue that 'because people see themselves as isolated individuals independent from others, they find it difficult to see their interdependence' (Gabriel and Mennell 2011: 8), the funeral directors I interviewed did for the most part explain things in We-I terms when relating the present and the everyday. Their accounts of everyday work and the 'story of the firm' unfolded through stories of an organisational We-I developing over time (Stanley 1993, 2013: 6–7). It was their stories of the long-ago past with which they had no direct personal involvement that were rife with *homo clausus* type assumptions. In connection with their aim of preserving tradition, it was interesting how the funeral directors did not talk about their everyday realities just in terms of the emergent present, but frequently referred back to their firm's past and also forward to projects and ideas for the future. In explaining their firms to me, they displayed discernible pride and belonging.

In attempting to learn about figuration through these conversations, I encountered an interesting problem. A favourite topic for the funeral directors was their family's history within the funeral firm over the generations, and many of them had a great deal to say about their great, and even great-great, grandparents at the firm. By

degrees, discussions of ‘the family’ initially encouraged me to think family was the be-all-end-all of figuration in these contexts, but then subsequently I realised this was incorrect. Within family-run funeral firms, there are of course family figurations in play, but these are neither always central nor coterminous with workplace figurations. This problem in my thinking was related to and exacerbated by issues with my questions. When I asked questions I thought would lead to information about figuration, all they talked about was family. Conversely, in explaining and discussing ongoing concerns or cooperation with other firms, details about figuration (as I more clearly understand it now) were given. Discussion of problems for the firm, particularly those pertaining to outsider groups, brought forward a wealth of information about intra-figurational relationships, developed throughout particular scenarios, and also details concerning over-time developments in terms of figuration members working together to solve pressing issues. In unravelling the problem in my thinking about figuration, I came to the conclusion that, in the context of the independent funeral firms, figuration can be learned about most fruitfully through discussions of ‘the outsiders’, the problems they create for ‘the established’ and how these relationships and balances have changed over time.

The ways in which the funeral directors described the histories of their firms, their daily work and how this compared with their recollections of their parents and grandparents, although initially leading me astray, were also extremely informative. This not only aided in my learning about the interwoven nature of family and workplace figurations within the particular funeral firms, but also informed me about the over-time developments discernible to the interviewees. In explaining everyday happenings in a firm, what has changed, developments in the funeral industry and their firm’s part in it, the interviewees inevitably told about other people. As Stanley points out, “‘self’ does not exist in isolation from interrelationship with other selves and other lives and is grounded in the material reality of everyday life’ (Stanley 1993: 206). Because people explain themselves in relation to shared activities with others, figuration can best be explored through asking about these relationships. It was also helpful to talk with other funeral directors at a firm too – talking with several employees and considering the similarities in how different people explain one another, their relationships, and the ongoing work of the firm, revealed how the firm is organised on an interpersonal level and gave a sense of shared in-group understandings.

When I started, I assumed that figurations can be pinned down, even though everything I have read says otherwise. In my mind the figuration was ‘there’, for I had slipped back into thinking in terms of ‘thingness’ and ‘placeness’. However, having re-read what Elias writes about figuration across the *Collected Works*, I now better understand some intricacies about figurations and how to learn about them from people. In taking the funeral directors’ accounts as seriously as Elias’s writing, it is possible to discover differences and similarities and diversions from Elias’s conceptual examples. In doing so, what the funeral directors say is not correct or incorrect in relation to what Elias discovered through his own research, but different and dependent on the situational specifics of their unique context. My re-reading of the *Collected Works* whilst learning about the funeral directors helped me better understand some of the intricacies of the funeral firm figurations I was exploring. By putting Elias’s concept of figuration to work, I now have a better understanding that figurations assemble for purposes, and for funeral directors these are primarily but not always work- and problem-centred. My research approach and *Collected Works* re-reading have helped me to more fully understand that figurations are not what is *a priori* ‘there’, and also cannot easily be pinned down.

When I first began re-reading Elias’s case studies involving figuration, I initially assumed funeral firm figurations would ‘work’ in similar ways. In noticing similarities between my interview transcripts and Elias’s various discussions of established–outsiders, I assumed that funeral firm figurations would play out in much the same ways. Conceptual application turned out to be my default stance, as I repeatedly found that I had unexpectedly slipped back into applying despite my efforts to the contrary. This may have been so because the whole presumption of the education system in the United States, where I was raised, is predicated upon

teaching people to apply what is taught to them. Of this Elias said, 'no, people must think for themselves instead', and he provided some ideas for people to use in their thinking. He also provided examples of how to go about doing this through his own case studies, encouraging future people to put ideas to use in whatever ways they may decide and for their own purposes. This is an incomprehensible approach to many people, who are socialised into traditions of applying and thus consider replication as the most sensible option. The ways in which many of today's generation (including myself) were taught to learn are fundamentally discordant with what Elias suggests we do.

However, as noted earlier, the interdependent relationship between the particular context and the specific figuration/s involved make efforts at application ineffectual, and I noticed my errors perhaps more quickly because Elias's ideas do not 'work' in application. As evidenced throughout the *Collected Works*, Elias writes about his ideas in general terms and also provides detailed examples of how he put them to use, and these set the stage for future researchers to contextually rework what he has provided. Although similarities may be noticed from Winston Parva and from aboard British Naval vessels, these tell me little about the experience of membership to funeral firm figurations specifically. As such, conceptual refashioning was needed both to accommodate the context and also to reflect the temporal differences.

My research project involved talking with living people rather than reading about them in books, as I have already commented. The people I interviewed were members of closely-knit groups which I did not belong to: and so, given my lack of belonging, my goal was to learn about their realities and matters important to them. Because I know figurations are the basis for how all groups of people are organised over time, I realised that figurations were in process in the firms I was learning about. However, that does not necessarily mean that the people being interviewed can explicitly and clearly report on the experience of membership. The levels of involvement inherent to figurational membership presents a situation where the researcher must learn about figuration through accounts of 'we' and 'us together' and situational anecdotes given in support of points made. The funeral directors' discussions of daily life including the people involved and the obstacles encountered did give a range of information about the characteristic interdependence of figurational membership, as well as the events and relationships that shape them over time. The intricacies of the funeral directors' figurational belonging and the realities of their membership to the figuration/s involved were never starkly clear to me, but by degrees lurking around and within the conversations we engaged in. Looking back on these encounters, I wonder whether information describing experiences of figurational membership might have been presented still differently had I been 'one of them', rather than an outsider-researcher the funeral directors were explaining to. Alternatively, perhaps the level of detachment implicit in being an outsider helped me to notice what I did.

I have learned that funeral firm figurations are bound together through their ongoing daily work and also their collective aim of keeping their firms in operation. They also share a communal set of beliefs about proper conduct, preserving traditional practices and the greater purposes of their work. It appears that funeral firm figurations are by extents interwoven, and that on both intra- and inter-figurational levels they are recently becoming increasingly closely knit in the face of a common 'enemy' taking the form of competing multi-national conglomerate firms. Tense competition with conglomerate firms seems also to have honed habitual understandings within and between independent firms in terms of 'who we are' being moulded in opposition to 'who we are not'.

Conclusion

I have shown how the *Collected Works* is useful for learning more and different things about Elias's ideas, both in terms of his bigger picture and regarding the concepts he used to shape it over time. In reading the *Collected Works* generously, thoroughly and in a chronological order of writing/publication, the set presents opportunities for following Elias's process of thinking as it develops and as it was influenced by the range of contexts he examines. Essentially, readers can follow the processual development of process sociological thinking. A key advantage of following Elias's process of thinking via the *Collected Works* is that readers can more straightforwardly make sense of his ideas and how they interweave to create his bigger picture.

Having made sense of his ideas, the goal of extending his work in unforeseen ways becomes that much more feasible. Reading Elias's work as a collected set not only clarifies his ideas through use, but also continues to remind readers by example that original thought and contextual reworking are the goals, and that these are attainable because Elias did it that way. The over-time unfolding of Elias's ideas have come 'alive' through the *Collected Works*, and this discussion has explored some of the benefits of using the set to actively 'think with' Elias in research. Following Elias's writing as it develops over time, it becomes clear that his ideas unfold in ways I could not otherwise have perceived from reading individual works. Each piece of work demonstrably builds on what came before.

Although the *Collected Works* was organised according to the Elias's known intentions and related information, it is ultimately a collection assembled and edited by others. If he was still alive, I wonder how Elias himself would have chosen to arrange his pieces into a collected set. I have found the *Collected Works*' ordering – and especially the editorial notes detailing dates of writing, publication and reworking – to be central in fostering my understanding of Eliasian ideas, but I am also curious how different ordering structures may provide still different interpretations of process sociology's unfolding and Elias's process of thinking.

I began reading the *Collected Works* at a mid-stage in my process sociological education. By the time the last of its volumes was published, I had previously read the English translations of Elias's major works. 'Before the *Collected Works*', I read Elias's books and articles in the happenstance order in which I was able to acquire them, and as a consequence found it difficult to discern shared fundamentals and central themes. This raises a further two thoughts in my mind. The first is how and in what ways does the experience of reading the *Collected Works* as a whole differ for process sociologists who have been reading Elias's work for decades prior to its publication. And the second is, have people whose encounter with the work of Elias and who began around the time that the *Collected Works* were fully published used it in the same way that I have, as an invitation to investigate and analyse a dataset of signal importance. Relatedly, I do not assume that German readers will have experienced the same sorts of joys and epiphanies, having had Suhrkamp's *Gesammelte Schriften in 19 Bänden* available to them a few years earlier (completed in 2010) and also previously having been able to read a number of the German pieces that were only recently translated into English.

The different sources configure the work and imply the thinking of Elias in rather different ways, as I have explored here, and so these potentially significantly different reading experiences are important for Eliasian scholarship to map and understand. My own stance regarding this has been to focus on discussion, and is to emphasise that reading Elias and thinking with Elias have some strong methodological aspects related to the particular configuration of his writing that is worked with. The *Collected Works* enables Elias scholars to engage with and read his work in a very different way from previously, and reading it generously in the way I have proposed opens up some significant new ways of thinking with Elias.

Notes

1. That is to say, English readers who are not also fluent in or able to read German. ♣.[#N1-ptri]
2. I make this distinction because Suhrkamp's *Gesammelte Schriften in 19 Bänden* (1997–2010) also includes Elias's poetry (Flores 2014). ♣.[#N2-ptri]
3. The *Collected Works* does not include Elias's poetry (Flores 2014), although it does contain several of his posthumous publications which were not included in Suhrkamp's *Gesammelte Schriften in 19 Bänden*. It also does not include some previously unpublished pieces that have since been included in *Excitement Processes* (2018), edited by Haut, Dolan, Reicher and Sánchez García. ♣.[#N3-ptri]
4. I am of course not the first to use Elias's concepts in present-day, comparatively short-term sociological research contexts involving direct interaction with people, and several notable Eliasian studies have used interview-based approaches. Mansfield (2008) used Elias's theory of involvement and detachment in her interview-based research into femininity and fitness activities. O'Connor and Goodwin (2012) re-interviewed some original subjects from Elias's the 'Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles' project (1962–4), people with whom Elias himself had never spoken. Ernst (2015) interviewed colleagues of Elias in her research into his life-as-figuration in terms of generational chains. And Castrén and Ketokivi (2015) used interviews in their figurational approach to studying the dynamics of family relationships. The researchers may have chosen this approach in effort to get at the figuration from a present-day vantage, although Ernst's (2015) and O'Connor and Goodwin's (2012) studies do also include considerable over-time components. Also, they all use interviews rather than proxy measures because the desired information can best (and in some cases only) be accessed through interaction with living group members. ♣.[#N4-ptri]

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