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Doing Developmental Research as a Figurational Sociologist: A Case Study on the Long-term Sportization of Swimming

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> '…present events illuminate the understanding of the past, and immersion in the past illuminates the present' (Elias 2000: 436)

Figurational sociologists have often adopted a long-term developmental or 'historical' approach in their research.[1] This approach was utilized by Norbert Elias (2000) in *The Civilizing Process* – often considered his most well-known and influential text – and in other texts such as *The Germans* (1996) and *The Court Society* (2006). Building on the work of Elias, figurational sociologists studying sport, health and leisure have adopted developmental approaches in seminal texts such as *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players* (Dunning and Sheard 2005) and in their contributions to edited textbooks such as *Quest for Excitement* (Elias and Dunning 1986) and *Sport Histories* (Dunning et al. 2004). Despite the adoption of a long-term developmental approach in much figurational research, little has been written by figurational sociologists about the methods and processes that are involved in conducting such research. Figurational sociologists have often discussed methodological issues such as involvement and detachment (e.g. Elias 1987a; Kilminster 2004; Mansfield 2007; Perry et al. 2004) and been keen to stress how their approach to research differs to more traditional notions of positivism and interpretivism (Maguire 1988; Bloyce 2004). Whilst there has also been some discussion of the use of documentary source material in the research process (Dolan 2009; Dolan and Connolly 2015; see also Chapter 10), there remains scope for figurational sociologists to discuss in greater detail the processes that are involved in

conducting developmental research. This chapter draws upon previous experience of undertaking document-based research on the long-term sportization of swimming (Cock 2012; see also Chapter 2 for a discussion of the concept of sportization), with the aim of providing practical examples, guidance and advice for researchers on the methods and processes of conducting developmental research from a figurational sociological perspective.

Why do figurational sociologists conduct developmental research?

The adoption of a long-term developmental approach within much figurational research can be explained in relation to the underpinning principles of figurational sociology: that people are fundamentally interdependent within social figurations; such figurations are fluid and ever-changing; long-term developments within human figurations tend to be unplanned and unforeseen; all forms of knowledge are generated by people whilst they are enmeshed within figurational networks (Goudsblom 1977). Elias (1978, 2000) emphasized that people are fundamentally interdependent and argued that it is therefore impossible to separate an 'individual person' from their 'wider society' when attempting to explain social developments. He proposed the concept of 'figuration' as a means to resolve the traditional agency-structure division between 'individual actions' and reified 'social forces' (Elias 1978, 2000). When sociologists strive to examine developments within human societies, they are investigating the interweaving processes and power-relationships between interdependent people within complex and processual figurational networks. It is impossible – or at least counterproductive – to separate interdependent people from their figurational relationships with others (Elias 1978).

Elias (1978) argued that the concept of 'figuration' provided a more adequate basis to examine developments, issues and problems within the social world. People interact with others throughout their daily lives and their intended actions interweave with those of others

within complex and dynamic (ever-changing) networks of power-relationships (Elias 1991). The interweaving of people's actions within such figurations 'unleashes further chains of actions, the direction and provisional outcome of which depend not on him [sic] but on the distribution of power and the structure of tensions within this whole mobile human network' (Elias 1991: 49-50). Figurational sociologists refer to this as the occurrence of unintended social outcomes. People often act with certain intentions in mind. However, as figurational networks become more complex and people's actions interweave with those of others through lengthening chains of interdependence, individual people are less likely to achieve their own particular desired outcomes (Elias 1978). Over time, the complex interweaving of people's intended actions – and the unintended outcomes that can result from their interdependence with other people and groups – can lead to the occurrence of blind social processes: developments within society that were not planned, intended or implemented by individual people (see Elias 1978, 1991, 2000; Goudsblom 1977; Murphy et al. 2000).

The civilizing process is an example of the type of long-term unplanned blind social processes that can be shown to have taken place over time. Elias (2000) examined documentary source material from across the period between the Middle Ages and the early twentieth century. This included contemporary manners and etiquette books providing instruction to young noblemen and aristocrats on the types of behaviours that were considered 'acceptable' within polite society. Approaching such issues from a long-term developmental perspective, Elias (2000) identified gradual trends, over time, towards more 'civilized' forms of conduct. This was evident, he argued, in long-term changing attitudes to issues such as violence, manners, etiquette and bodily functions within society. Such developments were not planned by individual people. Elias (2000) explained the increasing tendency towards greater self-control and the gradual emergence of more refined and

'civilized' forms of behaviour in relation to the complex interweaving of a range of long-term unplanned and unintended social processes.

For Elias and other figurational sociologists, the only way to examine the complex figurational dynamics that contribute to the occurrence of unplanned and unintended blind social processes is from a long-term developmental perspective. Although Elias (2000) took the period between the Middle Ages and the early twentieth century as the focal point for his investigation, he emphasized that the civilizing process did not 'start' and 'end' at these two points in time. Whatever period forms the basis of sociological investigation, a researcher is always examining part of a much longer flow of social processes that have no definitive 'start' or 'end' points. Whilst the long-term direction of such processes appeared to have taken place in a predominantly 'civilizing' direction, Elias (2000) emphasized that this was not a simplistic process, nor one of uni-linear progression. It was for such reasons that Elias (1987b, 1997) was critical of the tendency amongst many sociologists to focus their research on 'present day' social issues. Whether examining more recent social issues – or those that took place in the more distant past – figurational sociologists argue that it is necessary to adopt a long-term developmental approach in order to better understand the complex interweaving of intended, unintended and blind social processes that have contributed to particular issues within society. As van Krieken (1998: 67; original emphasis) has argued, 'we can only understand and explain any given sociological problem if it is seen as the outcome of some long-term process of development, if we trace its *sociogenesis*'. It was this conceptual framework of figurational sociology that underpinned the investigation into the long-term sportization of swimming (Cock 2012), which provides the case-study within the remaining sections of this chapter.

What 'methodological' approach do figurational sociologists adopt within the research process?

Documentary analysis is a common method of investigation amongst figurational sociologists when conducting long-term developmental research. On a practical level, this reflects the underpinning necessity to examine the long-term developmental and processual nature of human figurations. Figurational sociologists argue that it is only through the examination of human interdependencies across a period of 'not less than three generations' that it is possible to better understand the long-term unplanned and unintended processes that result from ongoing power-struggles between different people and groups over time (van Krieken 1998: 67). Depending upon the time periods that need to be examined, there may be instances where it is possible to generate relevant data through the use of methods such as interviews or focus groups. However, Dunning and Hughes (2013: 150) have argued that 'Elias's personally favoured method was that of documentary analysis since this is particularly well suited to the more general historical-comparative approach he advocated'. This was evident in Elias's (2000) analysis of contemporary manners and etiquette books when examining long-term civilizing processes in the period between the Middle Ages and the early twentieth century. It would have been impossible to undertake that type of socio-historical investigation through any method other than documentary analysis.

It is of course important for a researcher to consider the practicalities of undertaking a research project and identifying potential source material. From a figurational perspective, the proposed methodological framework must emerge from the nature of the problem that is being investigated (Bloyce 2004). For example, when investigating the long-term sportization of swimming (from around the late sixteenth to the early twentieth centuries), it was necessary to adopt a document-based form of research. One of the more traditional approaches to conducting document-based research is to access original hard-copy documents

directly from the archives, libraries or other public or private repositories in which they are stored. For this study, it was particularly important to negotiate access to the archives of the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA). One of the key developments in the emergence of many 'modern' sports during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the formation of centralized national governing bodies and the creation of standardized competition rules (Dunning et al. 2004). It would have been difficult to investigate the long-term sportization of swimming without gaining access to items such as the original minute books of the ASA. Polley (2007), a sports historian, has argued that such resources are invaluable for understanding the power-struggles that were involved in the creation of any national governing body and critical to understanding the day-to-day operations of an organization and its gradual development over time.

Access to the ASA archives had to be requested through direct contact with the organization. Initially, this required persistence through a series of emails and telephone conversations, but, once contact had been established, the ASA proved open and helpful in facilitating arrangements to visit their archives on numerous occasions. The original minute books of the ASA from the period 1869-1886 and 1894-1902 were subsequently available for examination as well as a separate minute book containing details from operational meetings of the ASA Committee from the period 1894-1903. For the period 1902-1909, the minutes and operational records of the ASA were printed and published in detailed ASA Handbooks, which were also available to access. However, there are often instances when conducting document-based research that some materials are unavailable. The original ASA minute book from the period 8 June 1886 to the 13 April 1894 had been lost or misplaced within the ASA archives. Whilst this point was acknowledged in the subsequent write-up of the research process, this meant that alternative steps also had to be taken to generate information relating to the activities of the ASA during this period from other sources, such as reports of ASA

meetings that were published in contemporary sports-based periodicals and newspaper articles (see Cock 2012).

In addition to the archives of the ASA, data were also generated from the collections and holdings of the British Library. This included a selection of 62 swimming-related books from across the period 1538-1908. Many of these items can perhaps best be described as early 'manuals' that provided information on swimming styles and techniques as well as background information on potential uses of swimming within contemporary societies. Six swimming-related periodicals were also available for access via the British Library: *The Swimming Record and Chronicle of Sporting Events* (1873-1874), *Cricket and Football Times, Bicycling, Athletic and Swimming Journal* (1880), *Swimming Notes and Record* (1884-1886), *Swimming* (1895), *The Swimming Magazine* (1898-1899) and *The Swimming News* (1907). These periodicals contained information such as fixtures, reports from competitive swimming events and a range of articles and editorials based on contemporary issues within the emerging sport of competitive swimming during the second half of the nineteenth century.

The examples above demonstrate the process through which an initial framework of investigation was developed in order to investigate the long-term sportization of swimming. There is always the possibility that serendipitous (chance) findings might be uncovered when conducting research. It is important for researchers to remember that 'research is a messy process' and that initial plans are not always implemented in a rigid and prescribed manner (Bloyce 2004: 144). Having identified a potential framework of investigation, there are however various issues that need to then be considered when a researcher begins to examine and interpret documentary source material from a long-term developmental perspective. It has become relatively common for researchers to consider the authenticity, credibility, representativeness and meaning of individual items of documentary source material (Scott

1990) and to engage in a process of thematic analysis to evaluate and interpret qualitative material (Bryman 2016). Engaging in such processes required the development of a framework of themes and sub-themes, based on the evaluation, indexing and collating or charting of material, both on the handwritten notes and photocopied pages that had been collected whilst conducting research and in *Microsoft Word* documents (Cock 2012). However, for figurational sociologists, it is also important that a researcher – whilst engaged in such processes – strives to analyze and interpret data in a relatively detached manner in order to examine the complex interweaving of intended, unintended and blind social processes from a long-term developmental perspective.

Involvement and detachment in the research process

Elias (1987a) was critical of the distinction between notions of 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity' within traditional research approaches. He argued that it is impossible for people to somehow attain either of these extremes when conducting research. Instead, it is important for researchers to remember that knowledge is created within human figurations. Researchers are part of the figurations that they study and their 'very participation and involvement is itself one of the conditions for comprehending the problem they try to solve as scientists' (Maguire 1988: 189). Given that involvement in figurational networks is inherent to the human condition, Elias (1987a) argued that all researchers must attempt to distance themselves as far as possible from their object of investigation whilst engaged in the research process. From a figurational perspective, the concepts of involvement and detachment are both integral (Elias 1987a). It is impossible for a researcher to somehow 'achieve' detachment. The level of involvement that a researcher experiences when conducting an investigation can only be mitigated through their efforts to engage in a 'detour-via-detachment' (Mennell 1998: 207). Involvement and detachment is therefore a 'sensitizing concept' for figurational sociologists

in their attempts to strive towards the generation of more reality-congruent forms of knowledge (Bloyce 2004: 150). Following a detour-via-detachment, the more detached forms of knowledge that have been generated as part of this process can then be used through a process of 'secondary involvement' in order to develop a more adequate explanation for those issues that are being examined (Dunning and Hughes 2013). For many researchers, this will involve the production of a more detached interpretation, analysis, evaluation or account of the events, processes or power-struggles that are being examined, often in the form of a dissertation, journal article or other written medium.

An important starting point when analyzing any type of document is to remember that all forms of documentary material are created by people. From a figurational perspective, it is important to recognize that the people who created a document were themselves enmeshed within chains of interdependence at the point that such materials were produced (Dolan 2009; Dolan and Connolly 2015). All documents have been produced for a purpose. The particular portrayal or argument that is offered by an author will however reflect their involvement within broader social networks of interdependence and power-relationships. The process of interpreting and locating documents within such networks requires a concerted effort from a researcher to distance themselves from their own day-to-day life and assumptions:

> Discovering the strangeness of historical events and practices from a modern perspective is an early form of involvement … but a detour via detachment requires reducing the distance between past and present by locating such events and practices within the figurations, standards of conduct, and traditions of the past (Dolan and Connolly 2015: 45).

For example, whilst investigating the long-term sportization of swimming, it was important to attempt to understand contemporary concerns and power-struggles surrounding the notions of 'amateurism' and 'professionalism' in nineteenth century sports. Notions of amateurism and

professionalism have changed over time. It would therefore have been inappropriate to project our modern-day perceptions of such issues back into the nineteenth century when analysing the power-struggles surrounding the gradual emergence of swimming as a predominantly 'amateur' sport during these periods. It is not the role of a researcher to criticize or pass judgement on the behaviours of people from previous eras. All forms of documentary evidence need to be considered from a more detached perspective within the context of the broader social interdependencies of those who originally created them and those whose actions might have been enabled or constrained through their involvement in such power-relationships.

There were ongoing power-struggles within the emerging sport of competitive swimming during the early-to-mid 1880s between the members of different groups who claimed to represent the interests of 'amateur' swimmers (Cock 2012). At this time, the Swimming Association of Great Britain (SAGB) claimed to be the national governing body of competitive swimming in England. A group of amateur swimming clubs broke away from the SAGB in 1884 in order to establish a rival governing body known as the Amateur Swimming Union (ASU) following ongoing power-struggles over issues relating to the amateur and professional status of competitors (Cock 2012). When conducting research on this period, it was important to examine documents about such groups via a process of engaging in a detour-via-detachment in order to avoid the risk of acting simply as 'naïve empiricists' during the research process (Dolan and Connolly 2015: 47). It was important to consider the perspective from which the original minute books of the SAGB might have been written, particularly in their stated attitudes and responses towards the ASU and the activities of its members. Cross-comparison of data with articles and commentaries published in contemporary swimming-based periodicals provided a basis to begin to locate such discussions from a more detached perspective within the broader figurational network of

interdependencies spanning that period, such as the extent to which the views and opinions portrayed by members of the SAGB reflected those of other people and groups towards the issues of amateurism and professionalism within nineteenth century society.

How do figurational sociologists develop long-term processual explanations from their research data?

When attempting to develop a processual understanding of sociological issues, Elias (1998: 192) argued that individual items of empirical data can be viewed 'as "stills" in a movie, as fragments of a process'. Surviving forms of documentary evidence tend to provide a snapshot of events, views or opinions at a particular point in time. Given that figurational sociologists strive to understand fluid chains of interdependence, power-relationships and long-term unplanned and unintended social processes, it is important to consider the manner in which researchers attempt to develop a more processual understanding of human figurations from such 'fragments' of potential data. There is often no inherent or inevitable link between such 'fragments'. All empirical data require a process of interpretation.

The gradual emergence of standardized competition laws was an important development in the long-term sportization of swimming (Cock 2012). However, it would not, on its own, be sufficient to examine the emergence of the first set of standardized laws that were instituted by the Associated Metropolitan Swimming Clubs (AMSC) on the 7 January 1869 in order to understand such developments. The AMSC was the original name of the organization that would later become known as the SAGB and then subsequently the Amateur Swimming Association (ASA) in 1886, which remains the national governing body of competitive swimming in England today (Cock 2012). In itself, the fact that a standardized set of Laws were established under the AMSC is interesting, but the relevance of this particular 'still' or 'fragment' of data can only start to be interpreted if it is considered in

relation to the broader 'movie' that is unfolding. In other words, the initial Laws of Amateur Swimming cannot be viewed in isolation. Such developments need to be placed within a broader social context in order to develop a processual understanding of such data. This requires the overall period of time within an investigation to be sub-divided so that documentary source material can be examined through a process of 'cross-reading' between different periods:

> in order to be able to trace how a figuration changed, one has to order the documents in a time-line and compare them… by cross-reading process-produced data over several periods in time, Elias [was] able to reveal changes in a figuration's implicit rules and the unintentional consequences of human action (Baur and Ernst 2011: 133).

The process of 'cross-reading' documentary source material can therefore be complex. It involves a process of examining different 'fragments' of data in one particular time period and then drawing multiple cross-comparisons with evidence from earlier and later periods in order to develop a processual understanding of what has changed over time. Baur and Ernst (2011) and Kilminster (2007) provide examples and more detailed discussions of the manner in which Elias conducted his analysis by moving backwards and forwards, time-and-time again, between different 'fragments' of data in order to develop a more cohesive and processual understanding of his research findings.

In considering the first standardized Laws of Amateur Swimming, the researcher would need to develop a processual understanding of relative links between different data sources from across the broad sweep of time periods that are being examined in order to develop a more adequate processual understanding of interactions between different people and groups that contributed to the gradual sportization of swimming. The researcher might need to consider why a set of standardized laws had not been established before 1869. What was the nature of early swimming competitions prior to this point? Why did standardized laws

gradually emerge towards the late 1860s? Who were the people and groups that were involved in such processes? What laws did they feel the need to establish? And how were the initial Laws of Amateur Swimming from the 7 January 1869 subsequently revised in future years and decades? Any forms of documentary evidence containing such data cannot be viewed in isolation. It is only by piecing together the longer 'story' in the ongoing development of any given social process through cross-reading of data that a researcher can begin to understand the inherent complexity of people's intended actions over time and, more particularly, the unintended consequences and blind social processes that result from the interweaving of such power-struggles within the figurational networks that are examined.

The emergence of digitized source material

There have been increasing trends in recent years amongst organizations such as the British Library towards the digitization of primary source material. The scanning of original books, treatises and an increasingly extensive range of local and national newspapers, magazines and periodicals is helping to make a wider range of 'historical' material more accessible to undergraduate students and other researchers via online databases. Some of the most well-known databases containing digitized 'historical' materials include *British Newspapers 1600-1900, British Periodicals, NewsVault, The Times Digital Archive 1785-2012, Historical Texts* (which includes *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*), *Historical Newspapers* and *UK Press Online*. The potential benefits of using such databases include the range, scope and number of digitized collections that can be searched and accessed from any location that has an internet connection. Many online databases also allow users to run search terms in the full-text of original 'historical' documents. This can allow researchers to conduct targeted keyword searches across an extensive range of digitized source material.

It had become evident whilst collecting data from the British Library and the archives of the ASA that limited information had been generated in relation to some aspects in the long-term sportization of swimming. To cite just one example, little information had been found within hard-copy sources about the types of early swimming contests that took place prior to the formation of the AMSC in 1869. Previous researchers had uncovered some limited evidence that early swimming contests had taken place in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (e.g. Love 2003). However, Polley (2007) has argued that resources such as local and regional newspapers and more specialized sports-related magazines and periodicals often provided greater variation in the type of information that was published. Newspapers and sport-related magazines or periodicals have long been used by historians and sociologists in their traditional hard-copy formats when investigating the 'history' of different sports. The *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* and *NewsVault* databases were therefore identified as resources that could potentially be used to generate a greater quantity and wider range of empirical data relating to the occurrence of early swimming contests. Between them, these databases contain a range of local, regional and national newspapers and more specialized sport-related periodicals.

The development of appropriate keyword search terms is central to the use of online digitized databases. In his own research, Dolan (2009: 194) has indicated that, 'the identification of appropriate words proceeded somewhat on a trial and error basis, as it was through increasing familiarisation with the data that forms of expression relating to consumption became apparent'. It is vital when conducting long-term developmental research that the same words, phrases and terminology are used that would have been prevalent during the period investigated (Dolan 2009). The development of formal search terms relating to early swimming contests was therefore also an ongoing process of trial, error and increasing familiarization with the types of words, phrases and terminology that were in common use at

the time. This process required engagement with existing literature, immersion in the process of hard-copy data collection and an initial process of trial-and-error when beginning to search online databases; in this instance, *NewsVault*. Common phrases that would be recognizable to a modern audience such as 'swimming association', 'swimming club', 'swimming competition', 'swimming gala', 'swimming championship', 'swimming contest' and 'swimming race' were used as search terms. However, additional phrases such as 'swimming society', 'swimming challenge', 'swimming entertainment', 'swimming fete', 'swimming match', 'swimming regatta', 'swim* for a wager' and 'swim* for money' were also identified. Whilst these additional terms were sometimes used during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to refer to early swimming contests, they are no longer in common use today and would not be immediately obvious to a modern audience. Such phrases were identified through trial-and-error as well as increasing familiarization with the types of words and phrases that gradually became evident from analyzing other contemporary hard-copy and digitized source materials (see Cock 2012).

The framework of search terms and techniques identified above provides one example to demonstrate the process of trial-and-error and the ongoing two-way traffic between data generation and analysis that can be required when conducting long-term developmental research using online digitized materials (Dolan 2009). It is, of course, good practice for researchers to maintain a detailed record of the databases that were used and the searches that were conducted. It is also important to ensure that the amount of data generated remains at a manageable level. It would not have been realistic to attempt to examine the same range of newspaper and periodical sources in their original hard-copy formats. The use of keyword searches throughout the full-text of digitized newspapers and periodicals provided a far more efficient means of attempting to generate data, particularly when early swimming contests appear to have taken place on such a sporadic basis or were not reported as often as other

contemporary practices, sports and pastimes. Once appropriate search terms have been identified and relevant data have been generated, these digitized materials can often be accessed online or downloaded for subsequent analysis. The analysis of such materials would then follow the same detour behaviours and processes of cross-reading that have been outlined in earlier sections of this chapter.

Digitized source material: a word of caution

There has been recent debate amongst historians and sociologists about the methodological challenges surrounding the generation, use and analysis of digitized source material. It is not the intention within this chapter to contribute to the intricacies of what has become known as the 'Origins of Football' debate. However, the methodological issues at the centre of this debate can have implications for those who are conducting long-term developmental research. Some historians have claimed that the history of football needs to be revised in order to place greater emphasis on the impact of working-class football subcultures in many nineteenth century towns and cities when explaining the long-term development of the game. Swain (2014a, 2014b, 2015a, 2015b, 2016) in particular has sought to generate an ever-wider range of data using online newspaper databases in his attempts to substantiate such claims. However, Curry and Dunning (2017: 876-877) have argued in response that some revisionist historians appear to have input 'the word "football"… into a newspaper search engine and almost every reference to the game, regardless of its relevance, has been included. This produces a great deal of data, but the quality of such evidence is surely questionable'. It is of course important when generating digitized source material that subsequent data are examined and interpreted within an appropriate socio-historical context.

One of the potential benefits of conducting developmental research from a figurational perspective is engagement in the process of testing and revising or refining existing

theoretical concepts and frameworks (Bloyce 2004). Traditionally, many historians have focussed predominantly on the collection and interpretation of empirical 'facts' or data:

> what is called history often looks like an accumulation of discrete actions by individual people. Because the level on which people are interconnected and interdependent… usually lies beyond or, at best, in the margins of the traditional field of historical study, the isolated, unrepeated data placed at the centre of such studies lack any systematic or verifiable framework of reference… This is why history, as currently understood, provides no real continuity of research. Ideas about the connections between events come and go. But in the end, one seems just as correct and just as unprovable as another (Elias 2006: 6).

The testing of theoretical frameworks provides a basis for sociologists to engage in a form of detour-behaviour. Rather than allowing present-day issues, concerns and sensitivities to influence their interpretation of past events, figurational sociologists argue that engagement in an ongoing two-way traffic between data analysis and sociological theorizing can potentially lead to more reality-congruent interpretations of social issues and processes (Dunning 1992). The continued testing, revision and refinement of sociological theories can also provide a more adequate basis for the ongoing development of scientific knowledge from one generation to the next (Elias 2006).

Whilst examining the long-term sportization of swimming, the concepts of civilizing processes, parliamentarization and sportization provided an initial theoretical framework to be tested during the investigation. When digitized and hard-copy source material was generated, such data were analysed and interpreted with a view to assessing the relative adequacy of existing theoretical explanations for the development of modern sports. The aim from a figurational perspective is to strive for the generation of 'theoretically-grounded empirical work' (Dunning et al. 1988: 267). There is therefore potentially less 'risk' through

the ongoing testing and revision of theoretical frameworks that sociologists will be led to entirely rewrite certain 'historical' developments through over-reliance upon (or over-emphasizing the importance of) particular items or sources of empirical data, from one generation to the next.

The sportization of swimming: key findings

Researchers are expected to report the main findings of an investigation, often in the form of a dissertation, thesis, peer-review journal article or other research output. From a figurational perspective, the process of interpreting data and examining the relevance of research findings in relation to existing literature and knowledge can also provide a basis to engage in a form of detour-behaviour (Dunning 1992). Having followed the procedures and processes outlined in the previous sections of this chapter, it was argued that the emergence of swimming as a modern competitive sport during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries could be explained in relation to the complex interweaving of long-term unintended and unplanned social processes (Cock 2012). The earliest reported swimming contests were less structured and less tightly regulated than modern forms of competitive swimming. These early contests in the late eighteenth and early-to-mid nineteenth centuries were often based upon a cash wager between two or more people, with the terms for each wager agreed directly between the protagonists (Cock 2012). In line with broader civilizing trends during these periods, betting upon the outcome of such contests provided a socially-acceptable means for people to experience heightened levels of tension excitement (Cock 2012). However, these early swimming contests were sporadic and could vary considerably in the terms that were imposed. Given that such events often took place in natural outdoor locations (rivers, lakes and the sea), some competitors were also known to drown whilst taking part in such contests (Cock 2012).

Swimming gradually emerged as a more organized and standardized 'modern' competitive sport during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The development of standardized competition laws was facilitated through emergence of an increasingly complex network of swimming clubs, societies and associations, as competitive swimming gradually became organized at local, county district and national levels in England, under the eventual jurisdiction of the ASA (Cock 2012). The Fédération Internationale de Natation Amateur (FINA) was subsequently established as the international governing body of competitive swimming in 1908. Such trends towards the sportization of swimming were underpinned by the complex interweaving of long-term unintended and unplanned civilizing processes. This included ongoing processes of state-formation, parliamentarization, pacification, lengthening chains of interdependence and a gradual lowering in the threshold of repugnance within England in the period between the Middle-Ages and the early twentieth century (Cock 2012). For figurational sociologists, it is only through examination of such processes from a long-term developmental perspective that a researcher can begin to develop a more reality-congruent understanding of such trends.

Conclusion

The need for researchers to remember that the creation of knowledge always and only takes place within human figurations is emphasized within this chapter. Research is a process that does not always occur in the straightforward terms that are often suggested in methodological textbooks. Indeed, the guidance, examples and advice provided within this chapter have also been portrayed in a more logical, structured and coherent manner than is often the case when engaged in the actual process of conducting research. From a figurational perspective, it is important for researchers to appreciate that social processes are complex and that long-term developments within human figurations are largely unplanned, unintended and unforeseen. In

attempting to generate a more reality-congruent understanding of such processes, it is necessary for researchers to strive for greater levels of involved-detachment in the research process (Dunning and Hughes 2013). This also applies when analyzing and interpreting source material across interweaving 'fragments' of data. According to figurational sociologists, there is greater scope through engagement in such processes for researchers to develop a more reality-congruent processual understanding of long-term unintended and unplanned social processes. As Elias (1978: 153-154; original emphasis) has argued, the 'task of sociological research is *to make these blind, uncontrolled processes more accessible to human understanding*'.

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[1] The term 'historical' is included in quotation marks, as figurational sociologists do not conduct research in the manner advocated by historians. Elias (2006) was critical of the tendency amongst some historians to over-emphasize the decisions, actions and roles of individual people or groups (often people in positions of importance) in order to explain a supposedly 'unique' sequence of historical events. For Elias, such an approach has often led historians to separate 'individual people' from their 'wider societies' and to develop more simplistic causal explanations for social issues or problems (Dunning and Hughes 2013). The figurational approach is more commonly described as developmental or processual and – through the concept of figuration (Elias 1978, 2006) – attempts to overcome the type of conceptual issues that have been evident in the work of some historians (see also Chapter 2 of this collection).