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## Organizational Centralization as Figural Dynamics: Movements and Counter-movements in the Gaelic Athletic Association

John Connolly  
*Dublin City University*

Paddy Dolan  
*Technological University Dublin, paddy.dolan@tudublin.ie*

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Authors: John Connolly and Paddy Dolan

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# **Organisational centralisation as figurational dynamics: Movements and counter-movements in the Gaelic Athletic Association**

**John Connolly** Dublin City University, Ireland

**Paddy Dolan** Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland

## **Abstract**

In this paper we develop aspects of Elias's figurational approach within organisational studies by using some of the core theoretical constructs as a model to explain organisational change through an empirical investigation of the dynamics of centralisation-decentralisation processes in an Irish sports organisation. Based on historical analysis, the paper documents the expanding interdependencies, figurational dynamics and shifting power balances which led to a gradual, non-linear movement towards greater integration and centralisation within the organisation.

**Key words** • figurations • centralisation • power • Elias • Ireland

## **Introduction**

Our intention in this paper is to further broaden the application of Elias's figurational approach within organisational studies by using some of the core theoretical constructs as a model to explain how processes of centralisation, and the counter-movement of decentralisation, emerge and develop within organisations. Specifically, we are interested in addressing the following questions: how and why does the tension balance between greater or lesser centralisation move and change in a specific direction? And how is this dynamic related to shifts in the power balances between an organisation's component units and also its relations with other organisations? Following Elias, we define organisational centralisation as the development of a specific social unit at a higher level of social integration than the other social units constituting the organisation, increasingly vested with greater powers of coordination and regulation over these other social units and functions.

The second objective of this paper, echoing Elias, is to demonstrate the need, and benefit, of a long-term developmental approach to the study of organisations. Even where figurational analysis has been applied to the study of organisations, the trend has been for studies that are present-orientated or based on the recent past (e.g. Dopson 2001, 2005; Dopson and Waddington 1996; Vidar Hanstead, Smith and Waddington 2008), which has tended to diminish the significance of long-term historical processes. We begin by outlining some of the core theoretical constructs from Elias's work upon which we draw.

## **Theoretical overview**

For Elias, the concept of figuration means conceptualising people in interdependence as dynamic webs of interdependent people characterised by different and fluid power balances. He used the concept of power balances, or ratios, as opposed to a static con-

cept of power – where it is conceived of as a possession of one individual, or group, rather than another – and argued that power ratios ‘form an integral part of all human relationships’ (Elias 1978, 74). Thus, the concept of functional interdependence is bound up with this; what determines the power differential between individuals or social units is the functions they have for one another. The power balance is always in proportion to the functional balance. To further illustrate the relational aspect of ‘power figurations’, Elias (1978) developed the analogy of the game model – involving an analysis of the power differentials between a series of interdependent players. Indeed, the application of this concept of game models is increasingly evident within contemporary figurational studies (e.g. Bloyce et al. 2008; Dopson and Waddington 1996; Vidar Hanstead et al. 2008).

In developing the theoretical construct of figuration, Elias saw it as a means of overcoming what he argued was the flawed dualism between ‘individual’ and ‘society’ – individuals as separate from social structures. It is the changing structure of figurations that explain, for example, how and why organisations, nations, values and identities are formed and change, or how highly centralised state-societies have developed from less centralised social units. In Elias’s central work, *The Civilising Process*, he demonstrates how an expansion in the length and density of social interdependencies from the eleventh to the sixteenth centuries in the geographical region we now know as France, which at the time was a series of relatively autonomous territorial formations such as kingdoms and duchies, was a facilitating factor in the gradual, but non-linear and uneven, development of a more unified, integrated and centralised social formation. Elias (2000) demonstrates that under pressure of competition, functional differentiation increases and with it the chain of social interdependencies becomes longer. As more and more figurations at different levels of social integration become functionally interdependent and comprise a broader, multi-tiered figuration, a pressure for, and dependence on, higher-level coordinating and integrating functions develops:

From a certain degree of functional differentiation onward, the complex web of intertwining human activities simply cannot continue to grow or even to function without coordinating organs at a correspondingly high level of organisation. (Elias 2000, 314)

Elias (2000) further illustrated, empirically and theoretically, how integration, like centralisation, is processual and refers to a structural transformation in how people are bonded to one other – there is a higher degree of functional interdependence. Elias (1991, 212, 277) contends that as the social interdependencies between social units expand and intensify, and awareness of these interdependencies advances, a greater sense of mutual identification develops, which, in turn, facilitates a greater sense of unity and stability – advancing integration. As Elias (1991, 168) explains, ‘...the scope of the identification between person and person, changes with the transition to a new stage of integration in a specific way. The scope of identification increases.’ Elias used the concepts ‘we-identity’ and ‘we-feelings’ to describe the feelings of a common bond that exists and develops between people – we-relations always exist at some level, the family being generally the first. Over time, people develop different layers of we-identity depending on the structure of interdependencies in which they are embedded. Thus, we-concepts are multi-layered (Elias 1991, 202). This is particularly relevant for understanding the organisational dynamics of modern organisations as these organisations comprise different component units, which in turn comprise people who may simultaneously be members of different intra-organisational units and who,

collectively, comprise the overall organisation. Indeed, this structure of overlapping membership, and the we-identities in relation to specific social units allied with this, can generate conflicts of loyalties and interests (Dunning and Sheard 1979). The outcome of such conflicts, interconnected with inter-organisational relations, determines the accent towards, or away from, greater integration.

Applying Elias's theoretical concepts to the study of change in sports organisations is not new; a more comprehensive body of work relates to sports studies more broadly, which developed from Elias and Dunning's seminal studies on the sociology of sport beginning in the 1960s (see Elias and Dunning 1966, 1986). However, apart from Dunning and Sheard's (1979) comprehensive study on the bifurcation of rugby, which included analysis and discussion with wider resonance to the study of organisations, such as organisational conflict and change, there has been a tendency within contemporary studies of sports organisations to base the theoretical explication of data around Elias's game models (e.g. Bloyce et al. 2008; Vidar Hanstad et al. 2008) rather than the wider figurational-sociological approach which the game-models comprise. Indeed, this echoes the situation within the field of organisational studies. Unlike in sports studies, figurational approaches have not nearly attracted the same attention. Much of the work is primarily focused on providing a conceptual description of figurational sociology and discussing and evaluating the possibilities offered by applying a figurational-sociological approach to the study of organisations (e.g. Newton 2001; van Iterson, Mastenbroek, and Soeters 2001); empirically informed study remains scant, despite some notable exceptions (e.g. Dopson 2001, 2005; Dopson and Waddington 1996; Newton 2004). And while Dopson (2001) correctly points out that all figurations are socially and historically produced and reproduced webs of interdependencies, few papers tend to adopt Elias's (2000) approach of historical analysis and synthesis to the study of figurational dynamics. But, such an omission is not a tendency restricted to figurational-sociological approaches; as Newton (2004) suggests, there remains a paucity of historical analysis more generally within organisational studies.

The study of centralisation–decentralisation processes has been a subject of interest to organisational researchers for some time (e.g. Mansfield 1973; Pugh et al. 1968). These early studies primarily concentrated on the creation of typologies, or frameworks, in which organisations could be mapped depending on their centralisation–decentralisation balance. A more exhaustive critique follows from a recent review of studies on centralisation–decentralisation in relation to multinational corporations by Ferner et al. (2004). In their analysis of the literature, they criticise the approaches taken by researchers, labelling it structuralist in focus, functionalist in orientation, underpinned by an evolutionary process of unilinear development, lacking substantive engagement with the dynamic nature of the process, and although generally ignoring the concept of power, being overwhelmingly '...based on the assumption that the appropriate level of centralisation or autonomy is determined in a hierarchical way by top executives' (Ferner et al. 2004, 370). Ferner et al. in their approach attribute changes, or shifts, in the balance between centralisation and decentralisation to processes of micro-political negotiation, while acknowledging that these processes are shaped and constrained by 'structural changes' occurring both 'externally' and 'internally'. While their study acknowledges the role of power and intra- and inter-organisational dynamics, the analysis does not explain why, for example, specific social units became more dominant and are capable of instigating more centralised structures (Ferner et al. 2004, 378–9, 380). For instance, they do not illustrate how some units became more dependent on other units. Another significant difference with our

approach is that we trace how increasing social interdependencies at the inter-organisational level are interwoven with changing power relations at the intra-organisational level.

MacKenzie's (2008) approach to centralisation–decentralisation draws from actor-network theory; however, as Newton (2001, 478–81) has argued in the case of actor-network theory more generally, such analyses are insufficiently attentive to the asymmetries within interdependency networks. The discursive approach to the study of organisations also differs from a figurational approach (e.g. Newton 2001, 473–5). For instance, in Doolin's (2003) discursive approach to organisational change, social structure is positioned as an effect of discourse and organisational change is not explained in terms of the immanent dynamic of shifting social interdependencies between people and groups within the organisation and between that organisation and others on a higher level of social integration and competition.

## **Method**

We examine the figurational dynamics that have led to advances in integration and centralisation within an Irish sports organisation, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) (or *Cumann Lúthchleas Gael* (CLG) in the Irish language), between 1884 and 2008. Our analysis is based on data obtained from various sources. Official records of the GAA, including the minute books of various organisational and administrative units, financial accounts, rule books and constitutions developed for the governance of the organisation since its inception, and several planning and strategy documents developed for the organisation, were accessed at the GAA's central administrative offices and archives in Croke Park, Dublin, the GAA archive at the Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich Library and Archive, Armagh, and the offices of the GAA Leinster Provincial Council in Portlaoise. In addition, data were derived from newspapers, autobiographies of GAA officials and other historical data relating to the organisation and wider social developments in Ireland more generally from the late 1870s to 2008.

The GAA is one of the largest sporting and cultural organisations in Ireland. Founded in 1884, the organisation has revenue of €64 million, physical assets of €3 billion and over 2,500 affiliated clubs (GAA 2007). The current organisational structure of the GAA includes a national congress, comprising representatives of county committees formed by affiliated clubs (Figure 1), responsible for the formulation and determination of policy via a form of intra-organisational democracy which involves majority voting to accept or reject changes to the rules governing the organisation (see GAA 2008a, 51). The national congress meets once yearly. Between annual conventions, the implementation of policy and regular decision-making is vested in a central executive, containing representatives of various administrative and operational units of the organisation, and another sub-unit, at a higher level of coordination, known as the management committee, to which many responsibilities have been devolved. These units are supplemented by a professional bureaucracy. In turn, many of the operational responsibilities are devolved to sub-units, which direct and coordinate operations at various regional levels, namely, provincial, county and club (GAA 2002). The structure is further complicated by the overlapping membership of several units by many individuals. Our analysis should not be considered an attempt to provide an historical account of the development of the GAA, but rather to use such historical data to demonstrate how the centralisation–decentralisation tension balance in organisations is shaped by the

changing power relations between people and groups within organisations and, in interconnected fashion, between various competing and cooperating organisations.

### **Organisational formation and centralising tensions in the GAA: 1884–1900**

The GAA was formed on October 1, 1884 by a group of middle-class Irishmen attempting to resist the Anglicisation of sport in Ireland by reviving ‘native’ Irish games and bringing athletics, then governed by English rules and controlled by members of the Anglo-Irish elite and middle-class Irishmen aligned with them, under the control of nationalist-minded Irishmen (De Búrca 1989). Existing clubs, and those seeking to engage in the sports of athletics, Gaelic football, hurling and handball, could affiliate to this new body (GAA 1885). The nascent organisational structure for the management and administration of the GAA consisted of a central executive, including ‘two representatives from each affiliated club’ (O’Sullivan 1916, 29). A general committee with representatives from affiliated clubs would meet once yearly to elect a central executive and agree rules for governing the organisation. However, as the number of clubs affiliating to the GAA grew, the pressure for regional coordinating bodies advanced (Hunt 2008; Mulvey 2002b) and county committees (O’Sullivan 1916) – counties were existing geographical boundaries instituted by the British for administrative purposes – which would comprise elected representatives from clubs, were instituted and operational responsibilities delegated to them (Figure 1). Furthermore, the number of club representatives on the central executive was changed to four elected members from the general committee as the previous structure was unworkable owing to the sheer volume of clubs now affiliated (*Celtic Times* June 18, 1887).

The formation of the GAA exacerbated tensions with several existing national representative associations and the clubs loyal to these bodies. National organisations already existed for the governance of rugby and soccer and in 1885 the Irish Amateur Athletic Association (IAAA) was formed by athletic clubs, mainly comprising members of the Anglo-Irish upper classes and Irish middle classes, opposed to the GAA (De Búrca 1989). In the struggle that now emerged for greater control of various sports in Ireland, emotional identification became critical in garnering social support. Members of the GAA labelled the IAAA and its membership as English, effeminate and opposed to the ideals of nationalist Ireland, while at the same time presenting the GAA as ‘true’ Gaelic-Irish in origin and nationalist in outlook (e.g. *Celtic Times* February 19, 1887). As tensions escalated, the leadership of the competing organisations sought to enhance their legitimacy by increasing their respective membership and club affiliation. The GAA’s leadership, at central, county and club level, also encouraged non-GAA clubs to switch allegiance to the GAA. Over the following year, affiliation of clubs to the GAA was significant – almost 400 clubs (Mandle 1987) – with emotional appeals based on national and ethnic identity having a considerable impact. Indicative of this was the repertoire of names based on contemporary and past militant nationalist groupings, nationalist leaders, ancient Gaelic warriors and images of ‘Gaelic’ Ireland under which clubs affiliated. Despite this, several factors hindered more rapid and substantial levels of affiliation. The ephemeral nature of many clubs or ‘combinations’, the relatively low number of formally constituted clubs and the intra-club nature of sporting contests meant many of these social groups felt no significant need for, or functional dependence upon, a national organisation, instead playing by locally agreed rules in ad hoc

arrangements (Garnham 1999; Hunt 2008; Mulvey 2002b). Furthermore, the lack of economic resources, which afflicted most of the labouring classes, affected their capacity and ability to form or join sporting organisations. To that extent, many clubs that formed in the 1880s and 1890s were of a transient nature (Hunt 2009).

However, the overall trajectory was toward affiliation to the GAA – by 1887 over 600 clubs had affiliated (Mandle 1987). From detailed historical sources, one can discern that many of those involved in the formation of clubs, and subsequently players and administrators, were motivated by a desire to engage in sports-related activity. Gaelic games organised by the GAA were preferred due to rising national sentiment, and an interest in the emotional excitement and social interaction of engaging in sports; there was a considerable sociable element both before and after games with drinking, music and other festivities regularly reported. Also, members of a rising Catholic middle class were motivated by the social prestige that the administrative positions of sports clubs provided in local communities. For instance, ‘ambitious, status conscious, professionally mobile young men’ served in the administrative positions of a variety of sporting clubs and non-sporting clubs simultaneously (Hunt 2008, 163; see also Hunt 2009, O’Donoghue 1987).

The accent in club affiliation has also been attributed to the efforts of many GAA activists who were also members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) (Mandle, 1987) and, as a result, felt their interests – support for an independent Irish republic – could be advanced through expanding the GAA. Several members of the central executive were leading members of the IRB, as were various members of clubs and county committees. The IRB faction had, by 1887, control within the central executive of the GAA and sought to enhance this level of influence by extending the powers of the central executive as they felt it would allow them to control and direct the organisation in their own interests (see McGee 2005, 165), particularly the organisation’s sub-units – the county committees and clubs (Mandle 1987). Meanwhile, those opposed to all secret societies (the clergy and constitutional nationalists) (De Búrca 1999; McGee 2005; Mandle 1987) sought to subvert this through the various clubs and county committees of which they were members.

During the period since its formation, clubs and county committees had become more dependent on the central executive. The reason for this was that as the number of GAA tournaments increased and formal competitions were established, the clubs’ functional dependence on the central executive, as a rule-making, standardising and organising body, gradually advanced (see, e.g. O’Donoghue 1987; *Celtic Times*, May 14, 1887). Matches between teams from different areas cannot be organised on a continuous basis without a degree of central coordination (Dunning and Sheard 1979). Furthermore, the frequency of fierce and acrimonious disputes, both on and off the field, between clubs (see e.g. O’Donoghue 1987; *Celtic Times*, October 22, 1887) added to the functional need for a third-party regulator and adjudicator of disputes. For instance, in 1887, the St Patricks Club ‘condemned’ players being members of more than one club and ‘asked its secretary to get the Dublin County Executive to establish “a rule on the matter”’ (Nolan 2005, 58).

### **Tendencies towards decentralisation and disintegration**

Despite the above, the overall dependency relationship between the central executive on the one hand and the clubs and county committees on the other was asymmetrical as



the balance of power lay in favour of the clubs and county committees. Indeed, the structure of this power balance is evident from the fact that in the GAA's constitution of 1887, no new rule could be introduced 'nor any of the foregoing altered except at a meeting of the general committee [national congress] called for the purpose' and where 'two-thirds of affiliated clubs must be represented, and three-fourths of those present at the meeting must agree on the question' (*Celtic Times*, June 18, 1887, 8). Essentially, annual congress, which included two members from each affiliated club, retained the function for amending rules for the governance and regulation of the organisation.

This power ratio in favour of clubs existed because of the structure of functional interdependency existing then between the clubs and central executive. Although national competitions and national rules had been developed, localism in the sports governed by the GAA was still predominant across Ireland – most clubs competed in intra-club or regional inter-club activities often under locally derived rules or versions of the national rules. Furthermore, the central executive, seeking to enhance the social power of the GAA in the struggle with the IAAA in particular, was dependent on the affiliation of clubs as the contest between the various sporting organisations intensified. They were also dependent on clubs for finance as the main source of income was affiliation fees from clubs and gate receipts from inter-club tournaments. For instance, in 1888, despite the fact that many clubs failed to submit affiliation fees, it accounted for one-third of the organisation's income (O'Sullivan 1916).

The desire of many people constituting clubs and county committees to preserve the autonomy of their units and their opposition to any further concentration of power at the centre (see Mandle 1987, 39–44, 59; *Celtic Times*, September 3, 1887, November 19, 1887, November, 26, 1887) arose from a fear of a loss of function and, with this, a decline in their power chances. County committees offered clubs, as county committees comprised club representatives, the opportunity to exert influence over local affairs by maintaining specific functions – the management and organisation of match fixtures within the county, control over player and club suspensions, and the appointment of third-party controllers (*Celtic Times*, November 19, 1887). Although a structural shift from localism was taking place towards more advanced levels of regional interdependence in relation to sports competition, this process was at an early stage as evidenced by the level of club involvement in national competitions (Mandle 1987) and by the lack of standardisation of game-forms at the national level (Hunt 2008). Furthermore, and interdependent with this, was the need by these sub-units to maintain the financial and social power of units they comprised. The GAA's membership comprised mainly those from the lower middle classes and some urban and rural working classes (Hunt 2008; McMullan 1995) and while neither of these social groups were the lowest socio-economic groups, many clubs experienced financial difficulties owing to the need to provide refreshments and medals at tournaments and cover players travelling expenses (O'Sullivan 1916; *Celtic Times*, October 29, 1887). Similarly, county committees, which provided medals, cups and prizes in various tournaments and competitions, depended on affiliation fees, competition entry fees and gate receipts for revenue (Hunt 2008). As a result, it appears several clubs and county committees could not, or refused to, submit affiliation fees to the central council (De Búrca 1999; Nolan 2005), which was also dependent on affiliation fees (Mandle 1987). For instance, the Wicklow county committee passed a resolution that 'affiliation fees and other moneys received by the County Committees should be devoted to furthering Gaelic pastimes in the county in which the money was subscribed' (O'Sullivan 1916, 82). For these reasons, the balance of power between the units lay in favour of clubs and county

committees. Indeed, they were able to force the devolution of more functions to county committees including 'power to suspend, disqualify, or expel clubs' in 1888 (O'Sullivan 1916, 64).

### **Organisational we-images**

Here, too, we can see how a figurational approach makes clearer the tensions and conflicts between the competing we-images experienced by the individuals comprising the organisation. The overlapping membership of a club, county committee and central council by some members emphasises the complexity and ambivalence of the felt emotion of organisational identity – the multi-layered aspect of organisational identity. The primary sports settings through which sportsmen socially interacted related to the club, be they officially constituted or otherwise. It was through this that club we-images were actualised and strengthened. Thus, the social organisation of clubs provided the conditions that fostered mutual identifications, most of which built on pre-existing bonds in social networks based on proximity and worker associations, both urban and rural (Hunt 2009; McMullan 1995). Furthermore, mutual identification is instilled and strengthened by excluding an enemy (de Swaan 1995); opposing, and to a large extent geographically contiguous, clubs functioned as they-groups – an enemy – and it was these relationships that aroused considerable hostility. Although, for some members, a national outlook transcended these parochial identifications, the scale of divisions between different units at that time suggests that local identifications were still intensely felt. Even some representatives of the central executive, at times, identified more closely with their respective county and/or club and central executive meetings were often a site of struggle between sectional (regional) interests (see *Sport*, January 13, 1891, March 7, 1891, November 21, 1891, December 5, 1891). The overlapping of membership and the related conflict between different we-identities, depending on the specific power ratio between them, can stall or reverse processes of integration. For example, in the early 1890s tensions between the different political groups in Ireland escalated following the death of the leader of the Irish parliamentary party, Charles Stewart Parnell (McGee 2005). The GAA split along similar lines, illustrating the interwoven nature of figurations – people comprise several different yet overlapping social units simultaneously. Internecine disputes arising from this, at both club and county committee level, resulted in many clubs and county committees disbanding or disaffiliating from the GAA (De Búrca 1999; Mandle 1987). Interrelated with this, few county committees entered a team in the national championships (O'Sullivan 1916) and the number of county committees represented at central executive meetings declined (O'Sullivan 1916), all of which decreased the functional dependence of the sub-units on the central executive. The position of central executive was losing functions and with this the power balance shifted. Many clubs and county committees who continued to function acted autonomously, amending the national playing rules without any reference to the formalised procedures in place (Lennon 1999). To illustrate the extent of the disintegration, the number of clubs affiliated had fallen from over 770 in 1889 to 122 by 1892 (Mandle 1987).

Tendencies towards reintegration re-emerged by the latter half of the 1890s as the number of clubs affiliating increased; clubs or combinations were still enmeshed in interdependent relationships and required coordination. Moreover, the fact that members of the GAA also constituted other organisations (the IRB) had the unplanned

effect of increasing the membership of the GAA; divisions within the IRB saw the various factions involved seeking to enhance their position by fostering the formation of, and controlling, GAA clubs (Mandle 1987). The conflicts and tensions between those identifying with different political groups were also overlapped by tensions stemming from other social interdependencies; disputes between county committees arising from sporting contests (O'Sullivan 1916); and contests for administrative positions within the organisation (see, e.g. Blake 1900; De Búrca 1984). For some, the national we-image of the organisation was weaker than the we-image of the local unit with which they identified. These differences were played out at several levels of integration. For example, in some instances, where the members of a club disagreed with the decision of their county committee regarding the imposition of sanctions or the awarding of a match result, and were so emotionally charged by this, they would disband and reform under a different code such as soccer or rugby (Hunt 2008). However, conflicts, generated by different intra-organisational identifications, are also evident at a higher level of coordination – central executive – and were reflected in animosities over the structure of the GAA (De Búrca 1984; *Sport*, January 31, 1891, February 7, 1891, February 21, 1891, March 7, 1891; November 21, 1891, December 5, 1891). For instance, in a letter to the newspaper, *Sport*, one county committee chairman claimed, '...the management of [GAA] affairs also was monopolised by that province [Munster]' (*Sport*, February 7, 1891, 7).

### **Advancing interdependencies and growing mutual identification: 1900–1925**

By the turn of the twentieth century, these tensions between various county committees had escalated as each sought to maintain their status and social power within the organisation while simultaneously fearing any advance in the social power of other county committees. Indeed, attempts were made in 1901 by the representatives of some county committees to destroy the social institution of central council and replace it with regional councils (O'Sullivan 1916), in which county committees within specific regions would have greater authority. However, although county committees (and clubs) sought to protect or enhance their autonomy, the expansion and intensification of interdependencies maintained their dependence on higher-level coordinating functions. This ambivalent situation resulted in the creation of a new tier of coordination known as provincial councils comprising representatives of each county committee in a specific region of Ireland; many of the functions at the central council level were decentralised to these new units (see De Búrca 1984, 8–9) – the central executive was still required for national coordination (Figure 1). This demonstrated a rise in the social power of county committees as more of the functions of the central executive was devolved to provincial councils. For instance, by 1907 the GAA constitution stated provincial councils could 'exercise all the powers previously held' by the central council (GAA 1907, 37).

By now the number of clubs and county committees affiliating was rising more rapidly (De Búrca 1984; Nolan 2005) – over 700 clubs and 23 county committees by 1906. This was facilitated to an extent by the healing of a rift within the IRB organisation (Mandle 1987), but also by the formation, and later increasing popularity, of the Gaelic League, whose formation was also the result of rising nationalist sentiment (De Búrca 1999). Membership of the GAA, anti-Britishness and fluency in the Irish language became increasingly conflated with a 'true' Gaelic Ireland and was regarded as

an expression of one's nationalist credentials (*Freemans Journal*, March 28, 1910; McDevitt 1997). The symbolism and conceptual repertoire of this alignment was increasingly mobilised by GAA activists, at all levels, in the early 1900s in the struggle to maintain and enhance membership. GAA activists sought to align the GAA with 'true Irishness' and correspondingly stigmatise they-groups – those playing and associating with competing sports. In concert with this, new rules were instituted in 1905 that debarred GAA members playing or attending 'foreign' sports (Mandle 1987).

The expansion in membership reflected an increase in the diversity of age profile and in the playing ability of those seeking to compete in sporting competitions and was a driving force in the creation of more differentiated and specialised competitions (Mandle 1987; Nolan 2005). In turn, this created a greater requirement for more integrated coordinating functions and a central authority to oversee this. As before, the expanding web of interdependencies was also a driving force in the advance of functional specialisation occurring at different levels within the organisation (GAA 1907, 1914). On the other hand, the increase in the length and density of interdependencies exacerbated tensions between the sub-units. An analysis of the minute books at county committee, provincial committee and the central executive during this period indicates an increasing number of appeals by clubs to county committees and often in turn to provincial committees. The social prestige and emotional satisfaction obtained from success in competitions, which at one level advanced integration, at another led clubs and county committees to use various methods, within and outside the rules, and both on and off the fields of competition, to either advance their own cause or impair the chances of their opponents. For instance, when a club was unhappy over a decision against them, they appealed to a county committee and where this failed to achieve the desired result, the club in question often brought an appeal to a higher-level coordinating unit. A similar situation occurred when disputes arose between county committees (CLG) Leinster Provincial Council Minutes 1916–1918). Thus, at one level the expansion in interdependencies amplified many existing animosities, while at another it gradually, though certainly not in a comprehensive manner, cemented the status and authority of units at higher levels of coordination.

The sense of meaning obtained from county identification had also grown with the expansion and intensification of interdependencies within and between counties. Yet, although the level of integration had advanced – 32 counties were affiliated by 1909 (De Búrca 1999) – there was still a 'drag effect' (Elias 1991, 212) as units were still prone to disaffiliate from the GAA following internecine disputes or even set up rival organisations (Mulvey 2002a). A further example of how the expansion in interdependencies initially escalated tensions can be seen at the central executive level. The increase in county committees affiliated now meant the central executive comprised over 40 members. Attendance at meetings was sporadic and some members now felt that to achieve greater coordination, the number of county committee representatives on the central executive should be restricted to three delegates from each of the four provinces (*Freemans Journal*, March 28, 1910; *Sport*, April 10, 1910). However, within a year of this resolution being passed, attempts were made to revert to the previous structure of central executive as some county committees felt they had lost influence (GAA 1911, 1913).

Despite the tensions, the pressure for greater integration remained strong. The formation and employment of we-images (Elias 1991) at GAA county committee level had advanced alongside a growing sense of a national we-image. This was facilitated by the intensification of interdependencies between units from disparate regions and, in

parallel with this process but at a higher level of integration and competition, by the escalation in tensions between those seeking an independent Ireland and those in Ireland seeking to maintain the Union of Ireland and Great Britain. In this contest, as before, the GAA was not only lauded by its members as the only 'true' sports organisation for 'Gaels' and nationalists, but was central to the 'revival of Irish nationality' (*Gaelic Annual* 1908, 7). As nationalist sentiment rose significantly during this period, specific sports and sporting organisations were again conflated either with Irish nationalism or British imperialism. These tensions, which eventually led to open conflict, had the effect of advancing greater unity between the social units comprising the GAA and, in concert, smoothing the path towards greater national unification of the organisation as a whole. Violent hostilities between Irish revolutionary forces in 1916 and the subsequent War of Independence (1919–1921), which involved members of the GAA, further facilitated the strengthening of the national we-image of the organisation among its members. However, this we-image of a national organisation and the emotions and feelings it aroused existed simultaneously with other, often contradictory, 'we' feelings towards one's club or county.

### **Integration tensions: 1925 to the 1950s**

From the mid-1920s, and throughout the 1930s, there was an expansion in interdependencies between different units of the GAA as the number of clubs affiliated increased from 1051 in 1924 (GAA 1925) to 1671 by 1937 (GAA 1947). As more units were engaged in different and more varied relationships, this intensification of functional interdependency frequently exacerbated tensions. These antagonisms and tensions often escalated in trials of strength requiring the units at higher levels of coordination to adjudicate. As before, disagreements emerged between clubs, between county committees, between provincial councils, and between county committees and provincial councils (see e.g. CLG Leinster Provisional Council Minutes; De Búrca 1999). Although disputes of this nature continued over the years, the expansion and intensification of interdependencies both impelled and cemented the functional dependence of each layer of sub-units on those at a higher level of integration for coordination.

The relative pacification of social spaces in Ireland following the end of the War of Independence and the Civil War had facilitated increased spectator interest and attendance at the GAA's inter-county sports competitions and with it the economic resources of the GAA (De Búrca 1999). Analogous with this was the increasing competitiveness and achievement orientation of teams at inter-county level, with organised training an established feature of many teams' pre-match preparations. However, this development added to the financial strain facing county committees, many of whom were already fundraising to prepare representative county teams to offset training, travel and 'broken time payments' to players due to injury (CLG Ulster Provincial Council Minutes; CLG Leinster Provincial Council Minutes; GAA 1930). Consequently, county committees sought the distribution of the additional income now being generated to cover these escalating costs. For example, between 1925 and 1946, county committees put forward motions at annual congress requesting increases in financial supports for both direct and indirect county team preparation (GAA 1925, 1929, 1930, 1931, 1934, 1946b). Gate receipts continued to increase up to the 1940s (CLG 1947; De Búrca 1999). For instance, in 1946 the income controlled by the central

executive increased by £9,393, of which £9,014 can be attributed to increased gate receipts (CLG 1947). In a spiralling process, this facilitated the further provision of grants and loans to both clubs and county committees (CLG 1947). As the central executive had sole jurisdiction over this, the dependence of units on the central executive increased. That the central executive was becoming increasingly perceived by county committees as more functionally important is illustrated by the attempts of county committees and the clubs they represented to have a permanent representative on the central executive. Between 1911 and 1946 motions were regularly proposed at annual congress to allow each individual county representation on the central executive (*Sport*, April 1, 1911; GAA 1929, 1935, 1936, 1939, 1940, 1946b). For instance, one delegate from county Meath, speaking in support of such a motion in 1939, which is indicative of the general tone in these debates, claimed: 'Some counties felt they had not a fair chance of representation... all counties should have a voice in the control of the Association' (GAA 1939, 10).

Eventually, in 1946 a motion for individual representation was carried. Yet, the scale of the interdependencies meant the pressure for integrating and coordinating functions remained, with the result that an 'executive committee' of 12 to 'deal with the routine matters' between central executive meetings (GAA 1946a, 57) was also formed (Figure 1), although there were still demands for individual county representation on this new committee (see GAA 1946b, 15–16). This demonstrates the tendencies towards a more centralised coordinating function but also the contradictory nature of this process, as these tendencies were accompanied by ambivalence towards such a process as a result of the double-bind spiral figuration within which each county committee functioned. For county committee members their function as organisers, administrators and the adjudicators of disputes at an intra-county level made them aware of the demands and concerns that arose at this level, and also of the expectations on them to address these. At the same time, at a higher level of integration and competition, each county committee, and the clubs they represented, was bonded to one another through competing and cooperating relationships of varying degrees – in the organising and contesting of inter-county sports competitions and in the constitution of the central executive. Here, the representatives of county committees were expected, by some members of the social groups they represented, primarily, to maintain, or enhance, the status and social power of their county unit, while simultaneously fulfilling their function as the main coordinating unit for the national organisation.

The addition of the new tier also illustrates the growing complexity of the overall figuration. In the following years, motions to amend the structure of the central executive and reduce its size continued to be proposed (GAA 1951, 1952, 1953), emphasising the divisions between those who increasingly espoused a more national outlook towards the organisation and those who identified more closely with local or provincial interests. The proposals for a smaller and more powerful central committee were often endorsed by the general secretary of the GAA (GAA 1953), who, because of his function, was more aware of the expanding inter-organisational interdependencies and the need for a more cohesive coordinating unit. The divisions between local and national were never a simplified dichotomy; a discourse indicating that GAA members were nationalist, and by default national in orientation, above all else, was omnipresent through to the 1950s and into the 1960s, as leading GAA officials, at all levels, continued to espouse narratives conflating the GAA with 'true' Irishness and an all-Ireland nation.

## **Advancing centralisation: 1960–2008**

The expansion and intensification of interdependencies was even more rapid from 1960s onwards, which was also reflected in Irish society more generally (Dolan 2005, 2009; Dolan and Connolly 2009). The number of clubs affiliated had reached over 3,000 by the early 1960s (GAA, 1962). This further expansion in interdependencies facilitated and advanced further functional specialisation; more tasks were devolved to subcommittees within the central organisation (GAA 1961, 1963, 1972) and a more specialised bureaucracy and administrative structure developed. For instance, by the 1970s a full-time management accountant along with other specialised staff had been appointed at the GAA's central offices (CLG 1971a, 1971b). Within the sub-units of the GAA, the functions of clubs, county committees and provincial councils also expanded, with the result that some counties employed full-time officials to service the workload involved (CLG 1971b). These positions also became more specialised and standardised. For instance, in the 1970s and 1980s GAA manuals were published to guide club officers (CLG Ard-Choiste Forbartha 1975; Moran 2002) and county committee and provincial council officers (CLG 1985) in the management and development of their units. More enhanced cooperation between the different sub-units in the planning and operation of administrative functions was evident (see GAA 1972, 51). New functions such as a public relations officer were developed (GAA, 1974) reflecting, in this instance, the expansion in interdependencies between the figuration of the GAA and the wider media figuration.

The size and quantity of financial transfers in the form of infrastructure grants from central funds to clubs and county committees increased significantly over the decades (CLG 1971b; De Búrca 1999). In parallel with this, the financial demands faced by clubs and county committees also escalated, driven in part by changing player and spectator expectations for improved facilities, but also by the growing competitiveness and achievement-orientation taking place within GAA sports. This compelling trend, in particular at inter-county level, had the unplanned effect of increasing the economic resources allocated for team preparation in inter-county competitions. Indeed, by the 1970s the GAA's strategic review noted that three-quarters of county committees were in debt (CLG 1971b). Thus, the dependence of club and county committees on the decisions made at central level advanced and with this a rise in the social power of the central executive. Here too, as indicated previously, such divisions are misleading as many within central council more closely identified with their county or club. Indeed, these tensions intensified between those identifying more closely with their locality or province and those with a wider national outlook towards the organisation with the expansion in interdependencies. Meetings of the central executive took longer to conduct with the proliferation in issues to be discussed and it became increasingly difficult to reach agreements as the unit comprised over 40 representatives. Some members now felt, as was reflected in a special report commissioned by the organisation and published in 1971, that a smaller unit with 'more authority and freedom of action' (CLG 1971b, 23) was required. In 1972 national congress voted to delegate much of the decision-making of the central executive to a smaller management committee of 13 (Figure 1). Many within the central executive resented this development and attempts were made in subsequent years to overturn the decision (GAA 1974). The perceived, and indeed real, loss of function was bitterly felt by many members of central executive; as one delegate suggested '...Central Council [executive]

today is nothing but a glorified fireside chat without a fire. It has no effect, good, bad or indifferent' (GAA 1974, 40).

This development reflected a more advanced level of integration; one aspect 'of many social integration processes from a lower to a higher level is the fact that power is transferred from one level to another' (Elias 1991, 165). A longer and denser structure of interdependencies, and growing awareness of these interdependencies, also meant more individuals at different levels within the organisation now felt the need for higher levels of coordination. And while this reflects a further shift in the power balance towards the centre, the structure of the power relationship meant that clubs and county committees were still able to reject attempts to even further decrease their function and power – the proposal to reduce the size of the national congress was defeated at this time (GAA 1972). The creation of the management committee was a further extension of the overlapping membership of different units across the organisation and is further evidence that all tiers were now intertwined in a more complex web of longer and denser interdependencies than in the past and in a broader multi-tiered figuration.

The extent of the advance in functional differentiation and specialisation within the GAA is evident from the expansion and assignment of work tasks and responsibilities across all units in the organisation. The subcommittee system, which had intermittently been effected at various times by the central units up to this point, became a structural requirement at central level in the 1960s to enable the operation of an expanding number of functions. By 1991, a similar process was considered necessary for county committees due to the expansion of activities at that level (GAA 1991). This expansion in specialist functions continued at different levels. For instance, in 2008 the Ulster provincial council operated 24 separate committees (CLG Comhairle Uladh 2008a). Even at county committee level, up to 15 separate committees can be involved in administrative and organisational functions (CLG Comhairle Uladh 2008b). Notwithstanding the fact that a considerable number of tasks at different levels in the organisation is conducted on a voluntary basis, the expansion of functions at county and provincial level, requiring greater specialisation and more time, has also led to increased levels of bureaucratisation and professionalisation. This expansion and refinement of interdependencies intensified integration and led to a compelling pressure to maintain, and indeed enhance, the power of coordinating units at higher levels of orientation. In this regard the functional dependence on the central authorities of the organisation for coordination and finance had advanced and with it the social power of the central authorities, as social power corresponds, solely, 'to the degree of dependence of the various interdependent functions on one another' (Elias 2000, 316). By 1995 many county boards were in debt (GAA 1997) and subsistence transfers to these units continued to such an extent that by 2007 almost €10 million was distributed between clubs and county committees for that year alone (GAA 2007). While this indicates a growing dependence by clubs and county committees on the central units vested with control over economic resources, the central units remain functionally dependent on county committees and clubs for the successful accomplishment of the sports competitions that generate a large portion this income. Since the 1970s, other forms of commercial revenue generation developed, such as pitch-side advertising, sponsorship and media rights; commercial revenues were over €14 million in 2007 (GAA 2008b) compared with £5,000 from sources outside of gate receipts in 1968 (CLG 1971b). Here too, this revenue source is still primarily dependent on the completion of inter-county competitions.



Thus, we see that the rapid expansion in the division of functions since the 1960s generated a compelling pressure for a more centralised management structure at a higher level. As Elias (2000) has shown, from a specific degree of functional differentiation onward, the complex web of intertwining activities cannot grow or function without coordinating organs at a correspondingly high level of organisation. Just as the functional importance of the central organs (central executive and management committee) of the organisation advanced, so too has the social power of the units. Over time, both the management committee and the central executive, to an extent, became more distanced from the other units. However, the overlapping nature of these units (the central executive and the management committee contain representatives from sub-units in the organisational tiers below them and decisions within the central units are based on majority-voting) and the identification of members with other we-images, at different levels of intensity, mean divisions surface around sectional and/or provincial interests and indeed emotional attachments (see Kelly 2007, 234–235).

## **Discussion and conclusion**

This paper demonstrates how Elias's theoretical constructs of figuration – involving power ratios and functional interdependency – and we-identifications can be used to explain the oscillations in integration and centralisation of the GAA. We documented how the formation of the GAA grew out of the tensions generated by a shift in the power balance between the Irish middle classes and the established Anglo-Irish and British aristocracy in favour of the former. It was these tensions that gave rise to the GAA, and its counterpart the IAAA, and the subsequent contest between these and other sports organisations for the control of various sports in Ireland. The ensuing oscillations between centralisation and decentralisation are explained by the changing structure, and extent, of the social interdependencies between those units that comprise the GAA, between the GAA and other organisations, and between social units at a higher level of integration and competition – the national we-groups of Ireland and Britain. The expansion in interdependencies, particularly from the early twentieth century, also provided the momentum for greater mutual identification between disparate units of the GAA and, in turn, greater integrated coordination of the organisation at a national level as coordinating functions were further absorbed by central units; although the tension between those with a stronger national we-image of the GAA and those with a more regional image remained. The further intensification of interdependencies from 1960s onwards and the resultant expansion in functional differentiation within the GAA generated a compelling pressure for coordinating units at higher levels of orientation. However, the overlapping nature of the GAA's organisational units and the identification of members with other we-images such as club or county, at different levels of intensity, mean divisions continue to surface.

This study highlights several aspects of Elias's work which has much to offer in advancing knowledge on organisational change and building upon recent figurational studies in this domain. The concept of figuration allows us to envisage organisations as a series of units in tension (cooperative and conflictual) in both an inter-organisational and intra-organisational context. Thus, we argue, that it is by looking at organisations as a web of interdependencies that we can explain more adequately how and why they are formed and changed. There are some similarities with other studies of change in organisations in respect of the interconnection between inter-organisational and intra-organisational relations (e.g. Marchington and Vincent 2004; Reay and Hinings 2009).

However, these studies tend to apply the concept of interactions to highlight relations between different social units – interdependencies is also deployed (e.g. Stern 1979), but is not conceptualised as in a figurational approach. Such concepts, in the words of Elias, ‘are apt to mislead’ (Elias and Dunning 1966, 397). For instance, the concept of interaction assumes that individuals, or the organisations they comprise, are separate and then interact rather than being conceptualised as in constant, but fluid, interdependence. Thus, it is social units always in tension, and the related change in functional interdependence, that must be the focus of analysis. Related to this is the connection between increasing interdependence and mutual identification, which is also a consistent theme in Elias’s work. We have shown how the formation, and subsequent amplifying and de-amplifying, of specific organisational and intra-organisational we-identities remains both an impediment and spur to further integration.

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