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## Beyond Logic and Norms: A Figurational Critique of Institutional Theory in Organisation Studies

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## BEYOND LOGIC AND NORMS: A FIGURATIONAL CRITIQUE OF INSTITUTIONAL THEORY IN ORGANISATION STUDIES

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*Abstract:* This paper provides a figurational critique of one of the most dominant theoretical frames within organisation studies - institutional theory. Despite its status as the leading theoretical lens for explaining organisational change, institutional theorists continue to struggle with the so called agency-structure issue and remain divided in how to overcome it. Our primary criticisms concern the propensity to invoke or generate dualisms, the reliance on the sociological frames which sustain this, and the failure to engage in any comprehensive way with Elias's writings on this subject.

*Keywords:* Figurational theory, Elias, Institutional theory, Agency-structure, Organisational change

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### *Introduction*

To date the application of Elias's theoretical ideas and concepts to organisation studies has been relatively limited (Connolly 2015; Connolly, Dolan, 2011, 2013, 2017; Dopson 2001, 2005; Dopson, Waddington 1996; Newton 1999, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2010; van Iterson et alii 2002; van Iterson, Mastenbroek, Soeters 2001) and his influence marginal. This eschewing of Elias's approach is somewhat surprising given that organisational theorists have applied or co-opted the wider theoretical frames associated with sociologists such as Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu and Margaret Archer specifically in seeking to address the what is called the 'structure-agency' issue; a position we will return to in greater detail later in this article. Readers here will perhaps be rather familiar with an Eliasian approach. To that end, our aim here is not to merely summarise what we feel are relevant aspects of Elias's formulations to organisational studies, essentially retracing what has been comprehensively done before. Rather, the trajectory of this paper is more critical in orientation, providing a figurational reading and critique of a specific, though clearly dominant, strand of thinking and theory within the organisation studies literature on the subject of organisational change.

Critical comparisons have previously been made between figurational sociology and other theoretical approaches applied within organisation studies and the sociology of organisations. Tim Newton's (1999, 2001, 2003) work, in particular, has documented the symmetries and variances between a figurational approach and actor-network theory, labour process theory and a Foucauldian approach. Indeed, several of our own contributions in this field both overlaps and extends this by comparing figurational sociology with other network approaches, discursive approaches, path dependency theory (Connolly, Dolan 2017a; Dolan, Connolly (forthcoming)) and institutional theory (Connolly, Dolan 2013). It is the latter frame that we return to here. Institutional theory is one of the most dominant, it has even be labelled «hegemonic» (Willmott 2010), theoretical strands or schools, within the broad church of theoretical frames applied to organisation studies. Our reason for seeking to 'target' institutional theory specifically is not so much its apparent status as the leading theoretical lens within organisation studies but the often uncritical acceptance of some of the theoretical formulations underpinning it. Certainly several organisational scholars have directed some critical attention at institutional theory (see Suddaby, Greenwood 2009) - though not from a figurational perspective. And while differences exist between institutional theorists particularly around the sociological influences which they draw from, there is occasionally a circling of wagons effect when it comes to more targeted criticism from those outside the fold. Furthermore, any review of the leading organisational journals, conference proceedings and contributions, and the citations associated with leading exponents of an institutional approach clearly illustrates the dominance of institutional theory. What we find somewhat perplexing is that this occurs despite persistent insecurities amongst institutional theorists over the 'structure-agency' issue, and how to address it, and a failure to acknowledge figurational sociology as a competing theory that directly tackles this issue.

### *A figurational critique of institutional theory*

The so called 'structure-agency' issue has received considerable attention from those aligned to institutional theory. However, institutional theorists have tended to relabel it as the 'paradox of embedded agency' (e.g. Battilana 2006; Delbridge, Edwards 2013; Mutch 2007; Seo, Creed 2002; Walker, Schlosser, Deephouse 2014). As Holm (1995: 398) succinctly puts it: «How can actors change institutions if their actions, intentions, and rationality are all conditioned by the very institution they wish to change». In that sense, it is to all intents and purposes the structure-agency issue in a different guise.

As is well established for many within the sociological community, Elias's overall theoretical framework and the comprehensive body of work connected with it is specifically directed at reframing and dissolving the dualisms of 'structure-agency' or 'individual-society' (Kilminster 2007). An Eliasian approach conceives of people as always in interdependence with others. It is not the case of the individual first existing and then becoming interdependent with others. There is no separation between 'individual' and their 'environment'. Despite Elias's extensive body of work which always emphasises and explains this, and plethora of texts from figurational scholars

which both summarise and identify this element of his work, there has been very little engagement from institutional theorists with this aspect of Elias's theoretical formulations. They to generate what Elias (2012 [1970]:113) argued is a senseless separation between individual and society:

... like tables and chairs, or pots and pans. One can find oneself caught up in long discussions of the nature of the relationship between these two apparently separate objects. Yet on another level of awareness one may know perfectly well that societies are composed of individuals, and that individuals can only possess specifically human characteristics such as their abilities to speak, think and live, in and through their relationship with other people - 'in society'.

Of course what makes the lack of engagement with Elias's work more surprising, if not unusual, has been the turn by both organisational theorists more generally, as well as institutional theorists, to other sociologists in their efforts to address the issue. Anthony Giddens' structuration theory became prominent amongst organisational scholars in their efforts to address the issue (Mutch 2007). For instance, Barley and Tolbert (1997:94) draw on structuration theory to «articulate a model of how institutions are formed, reproduced, and modified through an interplay of action and structure». Barley and Tolbert propose a recursive model and methodology based on structuration theory for examining institutionalisation processes empirically. Although they comprehensively document how we can observe and identify change, the prime deficiency in the model is that it does not explain why such change occurs, a conclusion also drawn by Seo and Creed (2002). Barley and Tolbert's model describes four sequential stages while still maintaining the very division the authors sought to surmount. For example, the first stage of their model entails the encoding of institutional principles in scripts - known as the behaviour regularities of actors. However, there is no explanation as to why the process occurs; how and why specific principles are encoded at a specific social juncture.

Ironically, while our critique is aimed at structuration theory's re-enforcement of duality, other organisational scholars (Hodgson 2007; Leca, Naccache 2006) contend that overcoming the 'paradox of embedded agency' requires the development of a non-conflating institutional theory - the need to maintain a separation between agency and structure so that the interrelationships that mutually shape each can be examined. In turn, critical realism has been advocated as the (non-conflating) theory capable of achieving this. Consequently, several of those rejecting Giddens, and other approaches, have tended to deploy Margaret Archer's ideas and the wider framework of critical realism from which it originates (Delbridge, Edwards 2013; Kirkpatrick, Ackroyd 2003; Leca, Naccache 2006; Mutch 2007). Although Archer acknowledges, and is briefly complimentary of Elias, there is from the outset a fundamental difference which cannot in any way be bridged by the suggestion that both their approaches are relational. The key difference stems from Archer's (1996) contention and belief around the duality of structure and agency, to which she gives ontological status. For instance, she describes it as the «basic issue» or «central dilemma» in modern social theory. Her insistence on duality puts her on a direct collision course with Elias who conceived of

them as distinct but inseparable. Elias (2010[1987]:15) advocated a

more realistic picture of people who, through their basic dispositions and inclinations, are directed towards and linked with each other in the most diverse ways. These people make up webs of interdependence or figurations of many kinds.

Not only are such webs always in process but so too is the structure of a person's social habitus which points to another key difference with Archer. Archer's theoretical contentions and formulations betray a static conception of human dispositions. This is evident even amongst studies which have mobilised her lens using historical data. For instance, Mutch (2007: 1130) leverages a conceptual formulation of Archer's, the «autonomous reflexive», to characterise the brewer Andrew Barclay Walker. «Autonomous reflexives» are conceptualised as:

... society's strategists, because they are swift to take decisions... pursue their own projects in a way that is likely to bring them into conflict with existing structures, structures that they either seek to use or change in pursuit of their wider projects.

In that sense, the «autonomous reflexive» appears as somewhat discrete and universal as they are imbued with a level of rationality that seems to transcend time and space. For instance, Archer's empirical work was based on interviews with contemporary subjects while Mutch's is directed at early to mid-nineteenth century subjects. There is little indication that social dispositions, and one's capacity to engage in various activities in specific ways, may be a function of a greater capacity for rationalisation or foresight as Elias would contend. Equally, while Mutch traces many of the direct relations that shaped Walker, there is little sense of the wider structure of social relations in which he was positioned, and which may have constrained or empowered his ability to develop innovations or how this may have changed. For instance, in our own work on the expansion of advertising at Arthur Guinness & Sons Ltd (Connolly, Dolan 2017b) we illustrate how the decision by senior managers to initiate direct advertising in Britain was enabled by a rise in the power chances of the middle classes relative to the landed classes which produced a social structure more conducive to commerce and advertising. This changing power ratio between bourgeoisie and those above (the aristocracy and gentry) and those below (lower class groups) shaped, propelled and constrained opportunities for innovation across a myriad of social spheres (see Dunning, Sheard 1979).

Perhaps it is Pierre Bourdieu more than any other sociologist who has had the most significant influence on institutional theory. Moreover, in recent times, his theoretical approach has been exalted as the prism through which 'the paradox of embedded' agency might be addressed (Battilana 2006; Gomez, Bouty 2011). Like Elias, Bourdieu advocated a relational sociology and used the concept of habitus - though concerns have been expressed that his conceptualisation leaves little room for agency (King 2000, 2005; Mutch 2003). For instance, Mutch draws upon an earlier critique of Bourdieu by Bernstein (1996: 136) in which he contends:

The formation of the internal structure of the particular habitus, the mode of its specific acquisition, which gives it its specificity, is not described. How it comes to be is not part of the description, only what it does. There is no description of its particular formation (Cited in Mutch 2007: 392).

Elias's approach to habitus and the wider theory within which it is framed does precisely this - explaining not only how the habitus changes but its capacity to, simultaneously, retain aspects of past social relations within the habitus.

Gomez and Bouty (2011) in seeking to explain a new innovation in haute cuisine connected with the French chef Alain Passard uses Bourdieu's concepts of practice, habitus and field. They present what they describe as «seven characteristic elements of Passard's habitus» (p.930) - what appears to be Passard's habitus at the time of the study (in 2000). Yet, there is no sense that the habitus is mutable and how any change in habitus led to the innovation. Passard's position within the field is also viewed as a key determinant. However, as King (2000: 426) argues more generally, the connection between field and habitus while suggesting «a richer account of social life because it highlights the struggle inherent in social life», does not solve the problem of change and instead re-generates the structure-agency dualism «because they [field and habitus] transform the interactions between individuals into objective, systemic properties which are prior to individuals». The concept of field also brings us to a crucial difference between the approaches of Elias and Bourdieu. While an analysis of an individual's changing position within a figuration and the power ratios between those comprising a figuration are central to Elias's approach, there are key differences between the concept of field and that of figuration. In Bourdieu's model, fields are constructed around specific activities, like sport, business, gastronomy and leisure (a formulation new institutionalism tends to implicitly follow). But what field is being occupied when people play golf and talk about new business opportunities, and continue the conversation over drinks in the clubhouse? The model of figuration connects people rather than activities, precisely because it's the same people whether working in the office or eating lunch in a nearby restaurant.

Another lens is that advocated by Seo and Creed (2002) which involves a dialectical perspective and the concept of praxis, underpinned by a Marxist analysis of social structure and a focus on long-term processes. According to Seo and Creed the model can resolve the 'paradox of embedded agency': first, by identifying the critical role of agents (praxis) in institutional change; second, and more importantly, «by depicting the dialectical processes through which the actions and consciousness of those agents not only are shaped by existing institutional arrangements but also are continuously reshaped by institutions' inevitable by-products - institutional contradictions» (p.226). Praxis is deemed critical. Individuals develop a self-awareness and critical understanding of prevailing social conditions and one's position within this; individuals' collective mobilisation in the face of this; and, finally, action to reconstruct the existing social arrangements. While asymmetrical power relations are acknowledged, the model's underlying frame is of individuals with static, timeless and universal structures of thinking (or dispositions generally). Consequently, awareness of one's status or position within the existing structure of power relations appears almost as a moment



of epiphany for some specific actors. When an individual's beliefs and values change they are expressions of the 'inner' self in isolation of others - rather than connected to any transformation in the very structure of the dispositions of people more generally.

As noted previously, institutional theorists identify the concept of «institutional logics» as a central aspect of explaining organisational change. For instance, Rao, Monin and Durand (2003: 797) lead «with the premise that institutional logics are the organizing principles that furnish guidelines to actors as to how to behave». The logics appear to act as discrete software programmes determining social action, one replacing the other over time, with less emphasis on the intermingling and blending of cultural principles. As Elias (1978[1970]: 76-80) argues, groups can act in opposition to interdependent groups without following particular rules of engagement. The actions of such groups interweave without the use of shared norms, yet such processes have a clear structure and immanent dynamic. Even though Rao et al acknowledge the presence of reward and punishment systems, thereby following a utilitarian logic themselves, the emphasis remains on the power of institutional logics. These logics constitute the identities of actors, and rival identities then compete for behavioural expression within each actor. Here the internalised logics appear to be subjectified to the extent that they organise the individual's actions. For Rao et al the sources of organisational change are

identity-discrepancy cues' including the sociopolitical legitimacy of activists, theorization of new roles to be adopted, defections of peers from the traditional logic to the insurgent logic, and gains that accrue to prior defectors (p. 797).

In effect, this means that role occupants switch institutional logics if new logic adherents have high levels of legitimacy based on professional success under the older logic, if the content and functions of the new role are well articulated in media and other communication channels, if people move from one logic to the other, and of such defectors gain success and legitimacy under the new logic. So it seems to be a rather psychologistic (or social psychologistic) account of organisational change based on rational choice or utilitarian considerations - the very perspective institutional theory sought to overcome. People move once others do, based on social comparison and emulation. This is of course an aspect of social interdependencies, in that one person's actions depend on another's, but there is little sense of the structural mechanisms of organisational change beyond the desire to abandon a sinking ship and the allure of a floating one on the horizon. Of course the metaphor only carries us so far, in that the more people that abandon the organisational ship the quicker it sinks.

Rao et al do acknowledge contradictions and mutability internal to each logic. Tension between logics also fosters change, but the problem remains in the definition and delineation of each logic. They appear more like Weber's ideal types than real cultural formations based on social interaction, interdependence, cooperation and antagonism. The logic is constructed by the analyst from activities of people, and subsequently used to explain those very activities. A figurational approach locates competing cultures more tightly to inter- and intra-group dynamics. So Elias speaks of court and bourgeois rationalities in the context of class conflict and the different network of mutual obligations in which courtiers and businessmen are embedded. To



the extent that such obligations and functions subsequently overlap or further diverge the different rationalities intermingle, creating a hybrid cultural form, or become more detached.

For Rao et al, *nouvelle cuisine* emerges because cultural entrepreneurs notice the changeability of classical cuisine, and then successfully argue that given it has changed, it could change yet again, and so there is no basis for claiming a single, dominant gastronomic form. These entrepreneurs were also inspired by changes in other fields such as drama and literature. If the former dominant schools of thought in literature can be challenged by new styles of prose, then why not classical cuisine with new menus? Rao et al locate the source of change in specific, momentous events like the French Revolution and the social turmoil of May 1968. A figurational approach sees social change as a more gradual process, though changing interdependencies can produce social revolutions if the old guard try to maintain superior status far beyond the phase when their actual power chances had declined. To use a geological metaphor, Rao et al attribute the change to the earthquake, while Elias identifies the gradual movements of tectonic plates. This conceptualisation of change as a long-term on-going process is central to a figurational approach (see for example Dunning, Murphy, Williams 1988). As we argued previously (see Connolly, Dolan 2013), once organisations form, it is the changing interdependencies between those individuals and groups at an intra-organisational level, at inter-organisational level, and between social groups on a higher level of integration and competition, and the overlapping and intertwining of these that explains the type and degree of organisational change (see also Dunning, Sheard 1976).

### *Conclusion*

We don't deny that there are certain symmetries between institutional theory and figurational theory (Connolly, Dolan 2013), nor that there are positions taken by advocates of an institutional approach that we would not wholeheartedly support - the need for historical methods in explaining organisational change (Suddaby, Greenwood 2009) being an example. However, there are far more fundamental distinctions, not least the dualisms created by institutionalists. Institutional theorists appear to be engaged in what van Krieken (2002: 256) calls,

an endless cycle of posing a dichotomy, using it, criticizing it, suggesting some sort of synthesis (e.g. structuration), and then strangely going back to using it again.

The figurational approach effectively bypasses debates between structure and agency, and between macro and micro levels of organisation, as all are different sides of the same coin. Linked with this tendency to generate dualisms is the fact that institutional theory continues to draw from, and sustain the position of, philosophy in social research which is counter to Elias's thinking and approach (see Kilminster 2007). What is also very perceptible when reading institutional accounts, in contrast with figurational work, is the absence of people. Institutional accounts are replete with concepts and

phrases such as institutions, logics, meanings, organisations, cognitive understandings, systems, fields, norms yet the people connected with these, as whole human beings, don't really find expression to anywhere near the same extent. For Elias on the other hand incorporating the 'rough and tumble' of people's lives is crucial in any account of social processes and structures. People (in interdependence) are at the core and readers are permitted to see real people with emotions, constraints and contradictions. In Elias's (2006[1969], 2012[1939], 2013[1989]; also Elias, Scotson 2008[1965]) own writings there is a certain style which provides rich and vivid accounts of the characters and social settings. Yet it is this apparent lucidness and the vivid portrayal of the lives of people that masks the depth and scale of his theoretical formulations.

It remains a source of puzzlement to us that Elias's work continues to remain marginal in addressing the so called structure-agency issue within organisational research. Elias (or those of us who engage with his approach and formulations) are occasionally mentioned in passing but any deeper consideration is avoided. That the focus of Elias's work is so relevant and clearly related to the issues examined by organisational scholars, and that so many of Elias's contemporaries remain a continuing source of engagement and influence, makes his invisibility all the more remarkable. But truth be told we are not surprised given what Kilminster (2007: 152-153) suggests is required in committing to an Eliasian perspective, among them the abandonment of philosophy, Marxism and fashionable social theory, the suspension of political ideologies, developing a distance from economics, history and psychology, and the realisation that one's reputation and academic career could be stalled. Sadly, the engagements that are more likely to occur are ones where Elias is briefly cited or a few concepts are applied and acknowledged in tandem with concepts from other theorists as theoretical pluralism or the 'pick and mix' approach to social scientific endeavour solidifies. Indeed, the presentism creeping into some figurational-sociological work, or the tendency towards discussing Eliasian concepts without bringing them to bear in a considered and comprehensive way to develop empirical-theoretical explanations, are but further manifestations of this overall trend where concern with short-term career development trumps the long-term perspective.

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