

Christopher King
christopher.king@hughbaird.ac.uk

Documentary analysis of the press: Problems of Involvement and Detachment for inexperienced researchers

1. Introduction

The purpose of this brief paper is to analyse from a figurational perspective the process involved in conducting a newspaper content analysis, and briefly comment on some of the main points concerned with problems of involvement and detachment. It is not the aim of this paper to provide a detailed examination or critique of figurational or process sociology, or indeed Norbert Elias's concept of involvement – detachment. However, given that Elias himself was keen to reject the traditional subjectivity/objectivity approach to providing explanations of one's understanding of the social world, it is necessary to briefly touch upon the involvement–detachment concept, given the often ideological complexities encountered when conducting a newspaper content analysis.

2. The emergence of the problem

The problem that this paper is going to discuss arose during studying under the supervision of a number of leading figurational sociologists, and more specifically in the context of writing and researching a Masters thesis on 'Media Portrayals of Male and Female Athletes: A Text and Picture Analysis of British National Newspaper Coverage of the Olympic Games Since 1948'. This case study relates to an attempt to utilize Norbert Elias's (1987) concept of involvement-detachment, and the occurring difficulties for 'new' or 'inexperienced' researchers who wish to adopt this theoretical approach.

3. Background to the study

It would seem logical to argue that research starts from a research problem, and in the quest for obtaining information research does not simply happen, it involves a detailed and systematic collection of data that has followed a carefully planned research design (Fulcher and Scott, 2003). Once a topic has been identified the researcher must select the most adequate method of investigation in order to address the problem (Fulcher and Scott, 2003). It has to be pointed out however, that research is never straight forward and many difficulties have to be overcome, and at times, initial ideas have to be scrapped due to problems with respondents, accessing data or material or even reaching the location to where the research needs to be carried out. Once the research process starts it can be argued that the key to sociological research is to not only ask questions such as 'What is going on here', but seek to explain why events or situations occur in the way that they do. Researchers may also wish to place a theory or concept under critically (re) assessment. Indeed, Elias and Scotson made reference to this when writing:

Once built up, one could examine how far such a model was consistent with the observable facts, could revise it or abandon it if it failed the test, and could hand it on for further tests, for revision or demolition, as the case may be, to others engaged in related enquiries (Elias and Scotson, 1965: 22).

Sociologists therefore may decide to engage in sociological research for a number of reasons. Given that research often involves investigating complex social situations, it is vital that the researcher selects the most adequate method of investigation for their project (Bryman, 2001). Often, academic research is carried out to fill a gap, test or (re) assess, as previous studies may have offered unsatisfactory explanations. In respect to the research within this case study, a detailed analysis of text and picture images of male and female athletes competing in the summer Olympic Games since 1948 in two British newspapers was conducted. Previous research surrounding this subject matter had been undertaken largely by feminist scholars. Such work had reported that female athletes were often trivialized, undermined and thus denigrated in terms of their image and performance. Although results differed from country to country and from different media outlets, the argument put forward

by many feminist researchers was that negative media coverage impacts on the current and future structure of female sport and sporting involvement.

4. Involvement and Detachment

It is fair to say, that from a figurational standpoint the content analysis used for the purpose of this study required a relatively detached and coherent breakdown of text, whether it be photographic imagery or printed commentaries. The concept of Involvement and Detachment is a central theme that runs through all figurational sociologists work. From this respect, it is of the utmost importance that researchers working from within this paradigm seek to distance themselves as much as possible from their own socialization or personal beliefs. In a sense one must rid themselves of 'ideological baggage'. As Maguire (1988) has noted "the sociologist-as-participant must be able to stand back and become the sociologist-as-observer-and-interpreter. In achieving this, it is argued that the research will wiled a more reality-congruent understanding of the subject matter and issues surrounding the research topic. Previous feminist work on this subject matter has received wide, but at times, uncritical acceptance. Although such research had provided valuable data and analysis, the debate often assumed a highly emotive and a heavily value-laden charter, thus resulting in some work neglecting to adequately appreciate the difference between 'how things have come to be the way they are' and judgmental visions of 'how things should be'. Therefore, by testing the exploratory power of the figurational approach and more specifically Norbert Elias's notion of involvement-detachment, the research used in this case study attempted to overcome difficulties concerned with emotional involvement.

Although figurational sociologists clearly strive to step back and distance themselves from their subject matter, it is an often difficult balance to strike between the two concepts. This is especially true in the research presented for this case study and for previous studies that have investigated media imagery or representations. An added complexity when examining newspaper imagery or text commentaries is the role or influence, or dare one say it, the involvement of the journalist. From a figurational perspective it may be suggested that the person writing the article or selecting photographic imagery is too involved, and would therefore provide a distorted reflection of the event based on personal or media interest. This

is a point raised by Dunning *et al* (1988: 8) who have argued that the press are not ‘neutral agents’, and therefore the researcher must be aware of what messages are being conveyed through either text commentary or photographic imagery. Although potential value-laden analyses of this kind are not confined to journalists or those working in media production, it makes it especially important and also at times challenging to put one’s own values, at least temporarily, to one side when engaging in research of this kind.

As noted then, figurational sociologists believe that placing practical and personal concerns to one side will result in a relatively detached and realistic analysis of the situation. It is claimed by many figurational sociologists, including Bloyce (2004: 149) that this approach will facilitate a better, more reality-congruent understanding of the issues related to our area of research. Furthermore, Waddington (2000: 7) has stipulated that this approach will also provide a more adequate basis for the formulation of relevant policy. In direct contrast, the research within this case presented here, encountered debate of a ‘highly emotionally charged situation’ whereby mainly feminist scholars sought change or attempted ‘do something’ or ‘change something’ based on individual ideological or emotional concern.

5. Problems of Involvement and Detachment in the work of ‘new’ or ‘inexperienced’ researchers

Until very recently figurational or process sociology and the work of Norbert Elias has been relatively neglected. However, in recent years a number of ‘figurational schools’ have arisen that have provided valuable contributions to the sociology of sport and exercise. Figurational sociology however still remains alien to many sociologists or those studying the discipline, and although attempts have been made to piece research fields other than those concerned with sport, exercise and health very few mainstream sociology academic textbooks incorporate the work of Norbert Elias or those figurational sociologists who have followed. Part of the problem for new researchers wishing to adopt the figurational approach is that many of the concepts and theories are ‘new’ and at times confusing. For example, the notion of Involvement and Detachment and finding the right combination is crucial and central to all aspects of figurational research. Yet achieving this balance between involvement-detachment is difficult, as figurational sociologists have not attempted to define how much involvement

or indeed detachment is required when engaging in sociological research. This is a point raised by Rojek (1986: 584-596) who notes, “Elias and other figurational sociologists have failed to outline the ground-rules so to speak, for the researcher wishing to adopt the appropriate level of detachment in their writing”. This illuminating statement perhaps implies that it is not just ‘new-comers’ to figurational sociology or indeed individual researchers who have initial problems of striking a balance. Having said this, figurational sociologists have duly responded, by suggesting that merely being aware of the sensitizing issue of ‘involvement-detachment’ is enough to ‘sensitize’ the researcher (e.g. Bloyce, 2004: 150). That given, it still may leave new researchers confused to where exactly they should be on the continuum between involvement-detachment, and in addition how does the new researcher know if their too involved, or indeed too detached?

Although Elias himself recognized that total detachment is unachievable and not altogether desirable, nor is it desirable to be completely involved, it still leaves the ‘inexperienced’ researcher with many questions when engaging in a newspaper content analysis that clearly requires a certain degree of involvement given the qualitative nature of the project. Without clear boundaries or goal posts it leaves those adopting the approach open to criticism like that initially leveled by Chris Rojek (1986). One way of avoiding such problems is to perhaps adopt the approach suggested by Maguire (1998) and Dunning (1992: 252), who have argued that by adopting ‘a long-term developmental perspective’ a more detached way of thinking can be achieved as ‘we avoid the retreat to the present’. In respect to this, Norbert Elias often criticized those researchers who, as he put it ‘retreated in to the present’ (For a more detailed discussion see Elias, 1987).

It is clear however that the key to producing more reality congruent research, from a figurational perspective at least, is to maintain an appropriate balance between these two roles of involvement-detachment (van Krieken, 1998). Furthermore, notions of the “ultimate truth” or “complete detachment” have no place in figurational research (Murphy, Sheard and Waddington, 2000: 104). Therefore, research that combines the two will result, it is argued, in relatively realistic outcomes that will enable action based on knowledge and not prejudice. Yet, to some inexperienced researchers controlling their emotional involvement when researching a topic that triggers great interest and sparks enthusiasm or intrigue is challenging, although evidently necessary if adopting the figurational approach.

6. Concluding points

In conclusion, this case study has attempted to outline some of the main problems of adopting a figurational approach, or more specifically applying Norbert Elias's notion of Involvement and Detachment to a documentary analysis of the press. It has highlighted some of the main concerns or difficulties that a 'new' or 'inexperienced' researcher may face when employing this concept. The problems outlined resulted from personal struggles with involvement-detachment, and thus it is not intended to act as a comprehensive discussion or critique of figurational theories, but merely a discussion paper for future researchers wishing to adopt this approach. The paper has also briefly attempted to highlight the often complex difficulties with conducting research as a whole, in doing so rejecting some of the regimented discussions that take place in some texts that suggest research is uncomplicated and without problems.

References

- Bloyce, D. (2004) 'Research is a Messy Process: A Case Study of a Figurational Sociology Approach to Conventional Issues in Social Science Research Methods'. *Graduate Journal of Social Science*, **Vol. 1:1** pp 144-166
- Bryman, A. (2004). *Social Research Methods* 2nd Edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Fulcher, J., & Scott, J. (2003) *Sociology*. 2nd Edition, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dunning, E., Murphy, P & Williams, J. (1988). *The Roots of Football Hooliganism: An Historical and Sociological Study*. London: Routledge.
- Dunning, E. (1992). 'Figurational Sociology and the Sociology of Sport: Some Concluding Remarks' In Dunning, E., & Rojek, C (Eds) *Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*. London: Macmillan Press. pp. 221-284.
- Elias, N and Scotson, J. (1965). *The Established and the Outsiders: A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems*. New Edition: London: Sage Publications, 1994).
- Elias, N. (1987). *Involvement and Detachment*. Oxford; Basil Blackwell
- Maguire, J. (1988). 'Doing Figurational Sociology: Some Preliminary Observations on Methodological Issues and Sensitising Concepts'. *Leisure Studies* **7**: pp 187-193.

Murphy, P., Sheard, K & Waddington, I. (2000) 'Figurational Sociology and its Application to Sport', In Dunning, E. & Coakley, J. (Eds) *Handbook of Sport Studies*, London: Sage.

Rojek, C (1986). 'Problems of Involvement and Detachment in the writings of Norbert Elias.' *British Journal of Sociology*, **37**: pp 584-596

van Krieken, R. (1998). *Norbert Elias*. London: Routledge.

Waddington, I. (2000). '*Doping in Sport: Problems of Involvement and Detachment*' Paper delivered at the Centre d'Etudes Olympiques, International Olympic Committee, Lausanne, Switzerland, November, 2000.