

[Elias and Freud on Childhood Socialisation]

Abstract: This paper offers an explanation as to why it is important for process sociology to re-read Freud's psychoanalysis and theory of culture in the light of Norbert Elias's theory of civilisation. We need Freud's insights into the raising of children for a process sociology that is a part of the confrontation with Freud's individualistic theory of culture and social understanding. For process sociology, it is important to be attentive to psychoanalytical experiences that can demonstrate that human beings are (in) a process in which they grow from childhood into the Society of Individuals.

Keywords: Childhood, Socialisation, Process sociology, Psychoanalysis, Neuroscience.

Introduction

The last time I met with Norbert Elias was in Amsterdam in the spring of 1990. We had agreed on the telephone that I should arrive at 9:00 p.m. That was when Elias's work day ended. I was welcomed by Elias's secretary. There was a pleasant atmosphere in the apartment. Elias was standing, supported by a cane, in the dining room, which was used as a study, to greet me. He smiled cordially and asked: «How was the trip? Have you found a place to stay?».

«Yes, Søren, I've gotten old, I'm in my 92nd year. I'm almost blind, hear poorly, and walk with difficulty, but I've made it to page 120 in a book about Freud's view of society». Elias grinned with his whole face, as he addressed his assistant, saying: «Isn't that right?». The assistant looked up and answered: «Page 121». I asked whether he wanted to dictate more. «No», replied Elias, «let's go into the next room. I'm interested in hearing what you have to say».

Elias's whole appearance and manner of dealing with students, and the way he communicated knowledge in 1977-78, when he lectured and held symposia at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität Frankfurt am Main, was marked by the milieu of which he was a part in the '30s in Frankfurt. He told me then that, in Frankfurt, when he was an assistant to Karl Mannheim in the '30s, people had a special way of dealing with colleagues and students, which was characterised by a close connection between the citizens of Frankfurt, the university, the Institut für Sozialforschung and the Sigmund Freud Institute, whose research and experiences were integrated into the curriculum of the university. It was a university tradition in which young people with a Jewish background had for the first time relatively free rein at a university.

It was also the first time that psychoanalysis, its theory and practice, were recognised in a university regime (Nagbøl 2012). See also Ilse Seglow's and Gisela Freund's contribution in Gleichmann *et alii* (1977). It had great influence on the tradition that was later designated the Frankfurt School.

From the beginning, Elias went his own way with works such as *Der höfische Mensch* (unpublished habilitation

from 1932-33, but published in 1968 as *Die höfische Gesellschaft*) and his magnum opus *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, Vol. 1 and 2 (1936 and 1939). But it cannot be ignored that a great source of inspiration for his ability to create this work was Freud's research.

Elias puts it this way in a note in *Über den Prozeß*:

In this connection it scarcely needs to be said, but is perhaps worth emphasizing explicitly, how much this study owes to the discoveries of Freud and the psychoanalytical school. The connections are obvious to anyone acquainted with psychoanalytical writings, and it did not seem necessary to point them out in particular instances, especially because this could not have been done without lengthy qualifications. Nor have the not inconsiderable differences between the whole approach of Freud and that adopted in this study been stressed explicitly, particularly as the two could perhaps after some discussion be made to agree without undue difficulty. It seemed more important to build a particular intellectual perspective as clearly as possible, without digressing into disputes at every turn (Elias 1994).

Norbert Elias's fascination with Freud research continued for the rest of his life. This is even true after his own *magnum opus* had become a sociological classic. He treated Freud's groundbreaking research with respectful criticism. It is Elias's continued reading and revision of Freud, seen in the light of his theory of civilisation and process sociology, that will be articulated here in the light of recent research on the relationship between psychoanalysis, neurophysiology, socialisation, educational theory, and sociology.

After Elias's death, his *Nachlaß* was collected at the Schiller National Museum and German Literature Archive, Marbach am Neckar. Here and in Norbert Elias's *Gesammelte Schriften*, I have pursued Elias's revision of Freud's works.

In an unpublished manuscript from 15 October 1986, Elias wrote:

There are sociologists and other social scientist who reject – or neglect – Freud's work in toto. I think that can no longer be done. The right way to assess the work of a great social scientist such as Freud – for that matter, of Marx – is that of opening discussions with the aim of achieving a balanced consensus as to which aspects of their work can be recognized as a scientific advance and embodied into the general fund of knowledge of the scientific disciplines concerned, which aspects are still doubtful and which may be left to libraries of oblivion.

In the unpublished manuscripts, Elias points to a number of relationships and themes that are important to take seriously in order to rescue the groundbreaking and innovative knowledge that Freud's research has unearthed.

This is the case with respect to individual development from infant to toddler, etc. – all the phases of childhood through which, Freud has demonstrated, children live in the society they grow up in. According to Elias, the early development of human beings cannot be investigated enough. It is a matter of exploring different social units and the special functions in the upbringing of human beings that make it possible for the species to survive.

In a series of repeated formulations in the aforementioned fragments of unpublished manuscripts from 1986, Elias emphasizes that we are dealing with research that, with empirical evidence, can and should develop knowledge in this vacuum, where we lack knowledge of the connection between inherited potential and the social processes and how they have an effect on the development of children. In this respect, the ball that Freud started rolling stopped too early.

There is thus much need for closer investigations of the linkages between hereditary and non-hereditary processes in children. In many respects, the ball set rolling by Freud has been stopped too early. I have already indicated one of the main reasons: Freud's theory is too much regarded as a theory which helps to explain and thus contributes to the cure of certain types of mental difficulties and illnesses. It has remained too strictly the preserve of a professional branch of medical practitioners. It had not yet been received as an empirically founded theory, indicating how a person develops from being a largely animalic little creature into a fully functioning human being.

It is not yet widely seen as a general theory, which begins to fill a gap in our animalic characteristics from birth and death, linking them to their more fully animalic ancestors, other characteristics which though biologically founded are not to be found in any animal and are uniquely human. The gap in our knowledge of the evolutionary stages over the course of which the human species develops from a non-human species is still very great and need not concern us here. But the Freudian theory is important, because it shows for the first time clearly and at the level of a theoretical synthesis the very animalic condition in which human beings are born and some of the mayor steps of the

humanisation of the animal.

With this said, Elias remonstrates Freud's egocentric human picture. Elias calls attention to the fact that, in his research and concept formation, Freud does not look over his own shoulder as a member of a society. He is not able to understand and categorise from the individual to the group. Elias argues that, through a critique of Freud's view of the individual, we can bring the knowledge Freud has unearthed into line with applicable social science standards.

Freud's social blindness leads to a thesis of a primordial father and, thereby, the myth that human history can be traced back to a progenitor. These fantasies about the aboriginal take the upper hand in Freud. Guilt becomes something inherited, as though it were a biologically archaic, eternally valid thing. It lives on in Freud's works as a natural repression, whose validity is hypostasised beyond the history of humankind. A categorical mistake that has great significance for Freud's cultural pessimism. The meaning of myth is grounded in legend and cultural historical materials, phenomena and tales, which are emptied of social motive. Biological potential becomes biological constant – and not the product of a long-term process of development. Focusing to such a high degree on sexuality and inherited guilt provides a mistaken picture of human reconstruction. Sexual emotions are pinned to myth.

Even though sexuality in a broad sense has a prominent role in human neurotic life, if we step out of the eternal Oedipal triangle with father and mother in the primary roles, there are other layers in the model of human instincts that can be traced to the differentiated learning processes that take place in different social settings. In other words, this is to say that we cannot be content with instinctual impulses that are immediately directed towards hunger and sex. It is also a matter of observing and understanding instinctual functions in countless forms of emotional control, self-restraint and the modification of self and others in the societies in which we grow up and become older. Thus, the function the modelling of instinctual drives has in different societies may be seen, as well as the affiliated mutually dependent processes that place different demands and challenges on the child's developmental perspective (Bernfeld 1925). Freud overlooks this perspective.

Elias puts it in an interview from 1987 in which he looks back on his works dealing with the theory of civilisation and sociology in this way:

The fundamental thesis from which I start is that people are naturally determined to live together with other people. People by nature have a potential for controlling and shaping instinctual impulses. But this potential can only be activated and developed through learning processes. Learning civilized behaviour and conventions is a human universal. There is no society in which young people do not learn to control and master their drives and emotions. How this process can take place without a renunciation of desire is one of the most important tasks we must learn (Homering 1999: 28)¹.

Thus, we must explore how the individual learns the codes, customs and norms that make it possible for the individual to function in various social constellations. This opens up an understanding for how social individualisation takes place and what it means for experience, self-regulation, control of instinctual impulses, and sensory social conventions in the contexts that are at play in society, in which an increasing differentiation and complexity are a reality. Human conduct and activities should not be governed by myths and prejudices but information and knowledge of how one behaves in the society in which one grows up. In this context, it is a matter becoming familiar, through sufficient empathy and distance, with the balances of power and "civilisation standards" that are dominant and exercise influence over one's social existence, the individual's I-we balance (Elias 1987).

The unconscious is not understood only as common sense but as important insights that are of significance, because society's individuals, wishes, norms, desires, and disgusts are bearers of other inclinations. They are a part of processes in which change, which follows its own dynamic, exercises influence on the individual's psychic and physical habitus. Interdependence and the compulsion towards complexity may be ascribed to many aspects. The aspect of movement plays a part, and individuals must learn to operate and orient themselves in a rapid stream of changes. Individual functional interplay means changes and transformation of knowledge and skills in which the

¹ H.C. Huf's conversations with Norbert Elias took place on 21 and 22 October 1987.

individual habitus grows out of the social habitus.

The social functions people have with respect to each other are more in play. This has to do with material conditions, infrastructural challenges, and the time-space relationship, which symbolises the compulsion of time. In the wake of the increased intricacies and complexities of society follows language's dynamic development.

As a means of communication between human beings, it is also related to the symbolic representations and institutions that people create together in the formations of society in which they live.

Michael Tomasello (1999) puts it this way in *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*:

Just as money is a symbolic representation of a social institution that has emerged from earlier economic activities, a natural language is a symbolically embodied institution that has developed historically from previously existing social and communicative activities.

Thus, an individualisation is produced in which human beings learn to control themselves. Language is used to understand things better. Language is used as a sensory dynamic guide in a process in which fundamental relationships change. The impact of the exchange between biological potential and the social in its multiplicity is the motor in this process. It is visible in scenes and can be observed in the civilizing and de-civilizing processes that are applicable in respective societal formations.

For Elias, it is important to emphasize that biology and social learning go hand in hand. Libidinous energies have an access to the musculature that, through the social processes in the figurations in which people live, have an influence on human cerebral dominance.

In the more recent Frankfurt tradition, people have also dealt with the potential in Freud's studies and have read them from a societal as well as a theoretical socialisation perspective. Psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and professor in socialisation/social psychology at the Institut für Gesellschaftswissenschaft, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt, Alfred Lorenzer (1922-2002) puts it this way in his article, *Freud: Die Natürlichkeit des Menschen und die Sozialität der Natur* from 1988:

For him [Freud], unconscious impulses were never simply transformed into vital energy. They were figurations of meaning that were always exact scenic guidelines for conduct. But does the presumption of this sort of organically inscribed structure of meaning that lies beneath and prior to communicable processes and which is a result of the interaction between fundamental somatic structures and effects from the outside world contradict all the insights we have about psychic learning processes on a genetically-determined inherited foundations? Are we to dispute the general division into hereditary genetic body forms and bodily functions and social experiences that, bit by bit, fill bodily organization with content?

We must, and it is precisely here that the Freudian concept outdoes its contemporary and current scientific opponents and holds its own as a prolegomena for a socialization theory that is seriously on a par with modern neurophysiology. Actually, the results of neurophysiology pave the way for a remarkable confirmation of Freud's view. Since neurophysiology at its current stage is working toward an understanding of the fundamental neural structure as a network that rests on an interplay between spontaneous and provoked activity, and this interaction, in turn, act upon the genes, so that the insights result in the presumption of an organic structure of meaning that has all the characteristics that Freud ascribes to the unconscious. We are looking at experiential figurations that have merged with bodily needs and processes, because they are the immediate impact of the earliest *interplay* between inherent foetal impulses and stimulations from the outside world. What is more: this interplay, in turn, *acts on* the genes in a manner that Luciano Mecacci can say that «every individual's brain [...] is distinguished from every other individual's brain – with biographically individual with culturally-specific features» (Lorenzer 1988: 436-437, my emphasis).

Like Elias, Lorenzer's gaze is directed to a high degree towards the mutual influence of the relationship between individual and social processes on the production of collective subjectivity. In this connection, he has studied how psychoanalysis has developed as a science.

He puts this way in response to the question: «What is central to the development of your theory?».

I'm not in the process of developing any theory but a meta-theoretical concept that is a statement and a theory. In my



case, I'm trying to provide an overall statement of psychoanalysis, as it has developed as a science, step by step, over the past 90 years. My efforts do not so much go into how people can go beyond Freud, but more into how we can go beyond Freud's self-misunderstandings. This seems to realise a more appropriate way of dealing with and reading psychoanalytic experience; to consider psychoanalysis within the realm of historical materialism. But this sort of access raises new and precise questions – for example: How are human personality structures socially produced in their fundamental elements? (Nagbøl 1982)

In brief, the basic elements of Lorenzer's socialisation theory may be broken down into three steps.

The first step, "the basic step", the intrauterine stage, starts as soon as the foetus appears as an independent organism in the mother's womb. Then, an interrelationship arises between mother and child, which as life in life develops a pattern of stimulation and reaction which, in connection with biological processes and bodily-determined movement figurations, is embedded as a structured pattern in the developing person. During this period, a process takes place that is both a natural and social process. Therefore, both poles, natural and social processes, must be understood as processes that mutually influence each other. The mother breeds in all societies a culturally-specific form of personality structure. The isolation of the mother is dissolved, when her intimate interaction with the child is conceived as an aspect of the overall social process. Thus, the woman acquires a special significance as mediator of culture and civilisation in human early development. The mother-child dyad can also be viewed as something that stretches beyond the applicable social order. What is successful in the mother-child dyad cannot be reduced to a governing social relationship.

The total intimacy between mother and child is broken and the relationship is changed, when after birth the child comes into contact with other people. This second stage in the formation of personality is designated as family. Of course, the formulas in the mother-child unity are not inoperative in the child's behaviour with other people, but they are altered and become more differentiated.

The third stage in the socialisation process is not really a third stage but more of a parallel socialisation aspect.

The child and the mother, whatever their stage, are a part of a cultural and material pattern that constantly affects the relationship. If we still speak of a third stage in the socialisation process, it is because mother and family, seen from the child's position, are not the whole world. The child is part of a culture and a civilisation process that has its special form of knives and forks, beds, chairs, buildings, streets, roads and cities – customs and habits, etc. In spite of, alongside of, and at the same time as mother, father, brother, sister, uncles, neighbours, etc., there exist extra-familial fields of socialisation and symbolic figures that are essential components of the child's lifeworld. These so-called transitional objects have a decisive meaning for the child's personality formation (Lorenzer 1981, 1986, 2002).

From the child's perspective, both as body and as the panorama of experience, the interrelationship between mother and child in the family and socially-produced forms of materiality constitute the space-time contexts in which personality formation takes place.

The social institutions and sensory symbols are in this connection figurations of meaning that are linked to and expand forms of experience and interaction in the mother-child dyad. The mother-child dyad is not inoperative, but it is also the case here that it changes.

At all these steps and levels, the unconscious is formed as a structure. The step we call consciousness is only reached in connection with two additional steps, of which the first step in the process of the formation of consciousness is pre-linguistic. This has to do with the child's sensory interaction with so-called transitional objects. The second step in the development consciousness is symbolic language. The introduction to language is also characterised by the fact that a sensory experience, the interaction with objects, is absorbed into behavioural play but is also translated into words.

In one of Lorenzer's last writings (Lorenzer 1986), he locates the psychoanalytic field of knowledge between sociology and neurophysiology. It belongs to sociology, because psychoanalysis deals with intimate and social conflicts, social interactions, that play out in human relationships in the social patterns they form with each other. These interactional relationships may be identified as immediate experiential engrams, registered in the body. They are inscribed in the body and, if we pursue them from a physiological perspective, can be identified as neural formulas. In Lorenzer's conception of psychoanalysis, it is decisive that instinctual figurations, the animal in the

human genetic heritage, are not reduced to either sociology or neurophysiology. Therefore, we must stick to the metapsychological concepts within psychoanalysis. But, according to Lorenzer, there is no pure unmodified, original and natural instinct. On the other hand, there is an instinctual nature that is independent of a social formulation.

The *real instinct* in the human being is a social product; it is the result of a dialectic between nature and society, produced in countless steps. It is an impact that is inscribed as specific forms of interaction in the individual.

Lorenzer's research in the 1980s with respect to the inscription of sensory forms of interaction into the body of the individual received in the 1990s full backing from recent cognitive science and the biologically-oriented constructivist *Embodied Cognitive Science* (Leuzinger-Bohleber 2002). It was, above all, the controversy with respect to biologically-oriented memory and brain research, which in a group of cognitive scientists led to the insight that human memory does not function analogously with a computer. It is argued, instead, that memory corresponds to the adaptive processes in the biological system. Memory becomes defined as the ability to organise neurological processes that result in experiences/observations and movements becoming related to each other, co-ordinated and categorised in the way they arose/were figured in earlier situations. In *Embodied Cognitive Science*, memory is understood as an active sequence of events in the collective organism. It consists of the sensory motor-affective co-ordination processes that are connected with ever adapting re-categorisation processes that are *automatic* in themselves. This tallies with the insights that Lorenzer has postulated – namely, that the interactional experiences that arise while the human being is still an embryo continue in the first modes of the child's life, where they are inscribed in the body as forms of interaction. The sensory forms of interaction are the basis for the sensory motor reaction modes that, for good or evil, characterise the way the body reacts – also later *unconsciously* – and, thus, later has an impact on information processing (*ibidem*).

The educational sociological perspective

In his critique of traditional educational modes of thinking, Siegfried Bernfeld calls attention to the anthropological and biological fact that the development of a human child takes much longer than animals'. The child has a much longer and more complicated developmental process. This, which he calls the development perspective, is determined by biological preconditions as well as by the way the society is set up.

Bernfeld (1925: 51) maintains:

However differently human societies may be structured, a child that is born into one has a place in it. Society must make a number of provisions simply to take account of the fact that a child develops. [...] The child is taken into consideration, so to speak, in the construction of society. Society has in some way or other reacted to the fact that the child develops.

Bernfeld suggests that these reactions in all their facets be called "Erziehung", a concept that covers upbringing, instruction and education. This concept is to draw our attention to the fact that society takes its rules from the so-called human developmental perspective.

With this definition, the concept achieves an expanse that contains perspectives from socialisation theory. For if one considers upbringing, instruction and education as a social process and not as a system of norms and guidelines, then the extent of the forms that can be observed is naturally greater.

The German sports educator Knut Dietrich (2002) in a lecture at the Danish University of Education, *Bevægelser i pædagogiske iscenesættelser – Hvorfor vi har brug for en pædagogisk sociologi* [*Movement in Educational Settings – Why Do We Need Educational Sociology*], inspired by Bernfeld, has given three short answers as to why he believes research in educational sociology is important:

- We need educational sociology, because upbringing, instruction and education are not only a social but also a societal process.

- A study of these processes must include all the factors that exercise influence on human education, socialisation and civilisation. The whole interplay of circumstances that exercise influence on people I designate educational settings. The object of educational research is educational settings.
- At the centre of these settings, we find acting and interacting human beings – when it comes down to it, people in movement. They produce the setting, change it, and they change themselves and develop in this process.

With the help of movement, the actor, so to speak, receives an impression of the world, shapes it at the same time, and makes it a part of himself. In the reverse direction, the subject is encompassed by the world and formed by it. The basic principle in this mutual exchange and representation of the world is *movement*; it exploits the plasticity of the body as well as the fact that the world may be shaped. From this perspective, it is a *medium* in which both sides encroach upon each other. This is a part of the mutual production of connections and changes, a mutual interplay that requires collaboration and does not let what collaborates remain unchanged. It is in the medium of movement that human beings take part in the worlds of others and thus become a part of their society (Gebauer, Wulf 1998).

These processes take place on different levels. Personal, individual life on one level and the organisation of social systems on the other. In order to find the connection between the two levels, we must look at the interaction between the actors and their social context (Dietrich 2002).

These processes are an expression of human praxis, which shows that they live in figurations in which they are interdependent (Elias 1970). We can observe this in various settings, such as romper rooms, kindergartens, schools, after-school institutions, playgrounds, parks, toys, private and public spaces, universities – in short, all contexts of life that symbolise society's reaction to the human developmental perspective.

Human beings – whether they are black, red, yellow or white – are members of a common species, the human family, and they are members of different societies at the same time. Here, we face a problem and a challenge that is distinctly human and does not affect migratory birds, wolves or other animals that cross human-created borders. For their development takes place far from the symbolic processes we call planning and cultural communication. They are fixed, so to speak, in their biological preconditions (Elias 1991).

Human beings communicate with the help of symbols that are created by human beings and differ from society to society. They are not like various animal species defined by species determinations, but by the society in which they grow up. The language, the customs and the knowledge that people thereby are capable of accumulating, are preserving, and conveyed from one generation to the next. Knowledge cannot be derived from genetic constants but develops when there is an exchange between a natural and a social process, in which it successfully unites and connects biological potential with the given social reality. It is a knowledge that arises and is adapted to a long learning process in the society in which one grows up. In addition, the structure and meaning of language are dependent on its social function, its cultural heritage and the civilisation's characteristic patterns for the relevant society. Human beings possess an ability to communicate but behave with one another on the basis of very different social and cultural preconditions. This means that the members of a single biological species, the human species, interact with a very high degree of social diversity. The fact that we are all capable of exploiting language and developing symbols means that, on one hand, human beings interact as units but, on the other hand, as a unity of differences. Sensory symbolic processes and language can thus serve to integrate or to split – to include or to exclude.

Identity in small countries – big and small power differences

Before my trip to Norbert Elias in Amsterdam in the spring of 1990, I had asked on the telephone what he would find meaningful to research if he had a long life in front of him.

Later, on the evening of our conversation, Elias brought up the question.

We know all too little about state formation processes and the psycho- and sociogenetic developments in small countries and the meaning these processes have for the psychic and physical habitus, I and we balances, in small nations. I have written about France and Germany. For you, Søren, it would be obvious to write about the Danish formation process. How did Danes survive the trauma of losing Norway in 1814 and other regions to Germany in 1864? What was said in Denmark has always made an impression upon me: «What is lost externally is gained inwardly», namely, in education and cultural work.

The processes of identity formation in small countries have led to qualities of life that large countries have not been able to develop but could only learn from, if they had access to studies of how the psychic and physical habitus develops in lands such as Denmark. We know all too little about this. And it would be a very exciting task. It would be meaningful for Danes and the image they have of themselves as a small nation on its way towards becoming integrated into a larger Europe.

I answered: «It is in Denmark not possible to get a job as a sociologist specializing in figurations sociology».

After a short pause, I asked what sociological problems were absorbing him at the moment.

«It's the problem of the relationship between people who are established and outsiders». Elias said that it is a sociological problem to read and describe very small differences in power. It is important to develop ways of analysing what makes us capable of achieving insight into the almost impenetrable power struggle in civilised countries. To produce these power patterns so that they neither look like a subjective description nor an objective reality that is so clear that it can be measured in dry numbers. And, as such, is counted and stacked up in statistics. It is of great importance to find out how those who sit with the opportunities for power make the development of others impossible. This creeping political power in which small differences have a great effect. Get hold of that which looks democratic but in reality is not.

These are examples of themes that should be followed up by further research, breaking with the myths and directing efforts towards a human research in which both personal involvement and scientific distance are directed towards process sociological models that, on several planes, try to account for the context of human life in all its facets.

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