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**Research is a messy process**  
**A case study of a figurational sociology approach to conventional issues**  
**in social science research methods**

## **Introduction**

Norbert Elias' approach to sociology has been regarded as highly significant over recent decades; not least in providing more adequate answers to outstanding issues. Elias developed what became known as the figurational perspective. Aspects of Elias' work challenged traditional assumptions within sociology. One such area had to do with the 'nature' of social research. Despite the fact that a figurational approach questions many of the conventional, taken for granted assumptions within social research methods, very little has been written by figurational sociologists specifically outlining the figurational approach to research methods.<sup>2</sup> The aim of this paper, then, is to provide an overview of a figurational approach to research methods,<sup>3</sup> by utilising a case study of specific research

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<sup>2</sup> The one exception is Maguire, Joe (1988) 'Doing figurational sociology: Some preliminary observations on methodological issues and sensitising concepts.' *Leisure Studies*, 7: pp. 187-193.

<sup>3</sup> It is not the aim of this paper to go into detail on the broader sensitising concepts of figurational sociology (for a fuller discussion of this approach, see, in particular, Elias, Norbert (1978) *What is Sociology?* New York: Columbia University Press. Mennell, Stephen (1992) *Norbert Elias: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell. Van Krieken, Robert (1998) *Norbert Elias*. London: Routledge. Furthermore, see Kilminster, Richard (1998) *The Sociological Revolution: From the Enlightenment to the global age*. London:

undertaken into the global diffusion of baseball.<sup>4</sup> To this end, this paper is split into four main sections. The first section outlines the figurational approach to research in general; in other words, what 'doing' figurational research entails. Sections two, three, and four provide outlines of how this approach necessarily impacts on one's research strategy, design and methods, respectively. From this, it is argued that, contrary to what many social research methods texts might have us believe, rarely can the research process involve such taken for granted, falsely dichotomous decisions as whether to adopt a qualitative or quantitative research strategy, for example. Indeed, research is a very 'messy process',<sup>5</sup> and the researcher is encouraged to recognise this more explicitly in outlining their research.

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Routledge for a useful summary of where figurational sociology stands today in relation to further developments in sociological theory and research.

<sup>4</sup> It is recognised that in presenting the paper in this way, it is not possible to provide an exhaustive account of the way a figurational approach impacts on all manner of research methods. However, the paper is designed in such a way that the reader can ascertain a 'flavour', so to speak, of the responses a figurational sociologist makes to conventional research methods.

<sup>5</sup> Murphy, Pat (2002) *Personal correspondence*.

### **Epistemology, ontology and research**

It is conventional within social science methodologies to discuss the ontological and epistemological considerations guiding the study.<sup>6</sup> Ontology refers to the theory of the 'nature' of social entities; that is to say the 'nature of reality'. Epistemology refers to the methods of procedure leading to knowledge, or the 'nature of knowledge'. According to Bryman the 'central point of orientation' regarding ontological considerations 'is the question of whether social entities can and should be considered objective entities that have a reality external to social actors, or whether they can and should be considered social constructions built up from perceptions and actions of social actors'.<sup>7</sup> In relation to one's epistemological considerations, Bryman argues, 'a particularly central issue ... is the question of whether the social world can and should be studied according to the same principles, procedures, and ethos as the natural sciences'.<sup>8</sup> Evidently, therefore, one's ontological position governs one's epistemological considerations, because those who advocate an objective ontological position, for example, will argue that the nature in which we can acquire knowledge can follow the ethos of the natural sciences. Whilst these are important ways of characterising research issues, it is argued that this distorts the research issue from the outset. Figuralists tend not to write about epistemology and ontology because, it is argued here, there are more object-adequate ways of understanding the focus of our study: human relationships. The notions of epistemology and ontology represent something of a false dichotomy. It is not that the two considerations are diametrically opposed, rather epistemology and ontology are so integrally related, they are so *interdependent*, there seems little sense in discussing them separately. That is to say, knowledge and reality are not separate entities; they are part of the same process. As Green argues, 'knowledge and ideas should not be seen as the products of an individual's thinking ... hence, the significance for figural sociology of the concept of involvement-detachment is an appreciation of the social "nature" of

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<sup>6</sup> Bryman, Alan (2001) *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 16.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

knowledge'.<sup>9</sup> It is now appropriate to outline the key sensitising concepts of figurational sociology that necessarily guide the research process, starting with the concept of 'involvement and detachment'.

### Involvement and Detachment

In sociological research Bryman argues that, 'there is a growing recognition that it is not feasible to keep the values that a researcher holds totally in check'.<sup>10</sup> Figurational sociologists, however, argue that whilst researchers cannot be completely detached in their work, this does not mean that it is desirable, or possible, for them to be completely involved. Therefore, from a figurational standpoint, the research process should involve a combination of involvement and detachment. Elias rejected the orthodox consideration of subjectivity/objectivity as a means of understanding the social world. Instead, he preferred to think in terms of explanations with varying degrees of adequacy. Thus, it is more appropriate to conceptualise explanations as having greater or lesser degrees of adequacy (or reality-congruence). As Murphy, Sheard and Waddington note,

'One important implication of Elias's approach is that researchers can realistically only aspire to develop explanations that have a greater degree of adequacy than preceding explanations. Notions such as "ultimate truth" and "complete detachment" have no place in his approach.'<sup>11</sup>

In this respect, figurational sociologists reject notions of single causalities and instead view data as aspects of more complex developmental processes: multi-causalities. Put simply, causes have multiple effects and effects become partial causes.

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<sup>9</sup> Green, Ken (2003) *Physical Education Teachers on Physical Education: A Sociological Study of Philosophies and Ideologies*. Chester: Chester Academic Press, p. 22.

<sup>10</sup> Bryman, p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Murphy, Pat et al. (2000) 'Figurational Sociology and its Application to Sport.' In: Jay Coakley & Eric Dunning (eds.) *Handbook of Sports Studies*. London: Sage, p. 104.

Elias complained that, 'anyone who, under the pretext of saying what science is, is really saying what he (sic) thinks it should be, is deceiving both himself and other people'.<sup>12</sup> As Murphy succinctly explains, 'while facts cannot speak for themselves, this is not the same as saying that facts can mean anything we want them to mean'.<sup>13</sup> As such, Elias, and figurational sociologists more generally, Rojek argues, promote 'a methodology of self-consciously distancing oneself from the object of study'.<sup>14</sup> However, the figurational position on this is not quite so straightforward as Rojek implies.

A more adequate appreciation of the figurational approach, involves recognition that figurationalists actually encourage sociologists to strive for an appropriate blend between involvement and detachment. Others, who have argued that Elias proposed complete objectivity, often caricature this approach.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Elias clearly recognised that it is impossible for any sociologist to achieve complete objectivity or 'detachment' in their research. After all, it is evident that unlike the chemist studying chemical reactions in a test-tube, the sociologist is inescapably a part of the phenomena that they are researching: human relationships. That is to say, 'social-scientific knowledge develops within the society it is part of, and not independently of it'.<sup>16</sup>

In this respect, a social scientific researcher is inevitably involved in their research. Although, this implies that natural scientists are capable of objectivity. The history of science demonstrates otherwise. Of course, it is possible to recognise that the

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<sup>12</sup> Elias, p. 52.

<sup>13</sup> Murphy, Pat (1994) 'The Role of Values in the Sociology of Sport.' In: Centre for Research into Sport and Society. *Introduction to the Sociology of Sport: Module 1 Unit 3*. Leicester: CRSS, University of Leicester, p. 150.

<sup>14</sup> Rojek, Chris (1992) 'The Field of Play in Sport and Leisure Studies.' In: Eric Dunning and Chris Rojek (eds.) *Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*. London: Macmillan, p. 17.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Hargreaves, Jennifer (1992) 'Sex, gender and the body in sport and leisure: Has there been a civilizing process?' In: Eric Dunning and Chris Rojek (eds.) *Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*. London: Macmillan, pp. 161-182; and Horne, John and David Jary 1987) 'The Figurational Sociology of Sport and Leisure of Elias and Dunning: An Exposition and Critique.' In: John Horne et al. (eds.) *Sport, Leisure and Social Relations*. London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, pp. 86-112.

<sup>16</sup> Van Krieken, p. 7.

nature of the phenomena that natural scientists are studying makes it easier for them to achieve higher levels of detachment. However, all science involves assumptions that may later be shown to be flawed. For instance, if natural scientists do not make different assumptions, what accounts for the debates and disagreements? Furthermore, involvement is a potential asset. Natural scientists do not know what it feels like to be a dolphin, for instance.

As Perry, Thurston and Green argue 'it is crucial to recognise the centrality of the researcher in the process of data generation and analysis'.<sup>17</sup> In other words, within a figural approach

'recognition is given to the *inevitability* of involvement and detachment and the potentially significant part it can play in developing a more reality-congruent picture of complex aspects of the social world ... This, it is worth noting, is precisely why figural sociologists prefer the concept involvement-detachment: it more accurately reflects the reality of the personal situations of social researchers than traditional conceptualisations of objectivity and subjectivity'.<sup>18</sup>

The aim for figural sociologists is to recognise their involvement as far as is possible and in so doing strive to distance oneself as far as is possible from one's values.

This approach, it is argued, will facilitate a better, more reality-congruent understanding of the issues related to our area of research. In this respect, Maguire proposes that, 'the sociologist-as-participant must be able to stand back and become the sociologist-as-observer-and-interpreter'.<sup>19</sup> This is 'conducive to the reduction of the

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<sup>17</sup> Perry, Catherine, Miranda Thurston and Ken Green (forthcoming) 'Involvement and Detachment in researching sexuality: Reflections on the process of semi-structured interviewing.' *Qualitative Health Research*.

<sup>18</sup> Perry et al.

<sup>19</sup> Maguire, p. 190.

fantasy content of people's thinking', or people's ideological preconceptions.<sup>20</sup> It is through such an approach, figurational sociologists argue, that the researcher can maximise 'the chances of obtaining secure knowledge'.<sup>21</sup> Garfinkel<sup>22</sup> argued that a reflexive approach is crucial in relation to theories of the sociology of knowledge, 'in which the role of "self" and "subjectivity" in the research process is put under critical and explicit scrutiny'.<sup>23</sup> According to Perry et al. 'some may view the concept of reflexivity and involvement-detachment as synonymous'. This, they argue, 'is misguided'. Instead, 'it is better to view reflexivity as an aspect of the issue of involvement-detachment. This, arguably, goes beyond the notion of reflexivity in that it provides a framework of practical relevance to the whole research process, and, as such, provides guidance to researchers that can enable them to safeguard the integrity of their work'.<sup>24</sup>

Rojek has argued that 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.<sup>25</sup> Contrary to this, it might be argued that it would be inappropriate to provide ground rules for sensitising concepts. The issue of 'involvement-detachment' is a sensitising concept for figurational sociology and as such, sensitising the researcher to the issue. Being aware of the need to strive to remain as detached as possible is, specifically, enough to sensitise the researcher.

What 'tools' the researcher uses to achieve this is not the issue: the issue is that the researcher needs to be aware of the concept in the first place. However, this is not to avoid dealing with a complex issue, and thus avoid striving for further understanding on the

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<sup>20</sup> Dunning, Eric (1999) *Sport Matters: Sociological studies of sport, violence and civilization*. London: Routledge, p. 244.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 243.

<sup>22</sup> Garfinkel, Harold (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

<sup>23</sup> Perry et al.

<sup>24</sup> Perry et al. It is simply not possible, within the confines of this paper, to provide a fuller discussion of the sociology of knowledge and the position of 'reflexivity' within that debate. For a fuller account of this, from a figurational standpoint, see Kilminster, *The Sociological Revolution*.

<sup>25</sup> Rojek, Chris (1986) 'Problems of Involvement and Detachment in the Writings of Norbert Elias.' *British Journal of Sociology*, 37: pp. 584-596.

issue Rojek raises. Indeed, figural sociologists have sought to address Rojek's criticism. Maguire plausibly argues that the 'adoption of a long-term, developmental perspective' can, but does not necessarily, enable more detached levels of thinking. This is because, he argues, 'more highly involved approaches tend to have a short-term time perspective' reflective of the concerns of the day.<sup>26</sup> Dunning agrees that we might achieve greater detachment from our work if we 'avoid the "retreat to the present"'.<sup>27</sup>

Dunning also contends that researchers need to relate their work 'to the existing body of knowledge' in their field, and by doing so this may also enable greater levels of detachment.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, 'comparison of different "we" perspectives may help, but the employment of "they" perspectives, which show the figuration from a greater distance, offers a more adequate view of how the intentions and actions of the various groups are interlocked'.<sup>29</sup> Such an approach is highlighted more explicitly below. Finally, with regard to the issue of involvement and detachment, Maguire argues that the approach proposed by figural sociologists is not 'a question simply of gathering facts'.<sup>30</sup> Rather, he suggests that,

'The task is to trace and analyse the significance which specific events have in time and their conjunction with other events. In so doing, the researcher must come to terms with both the particular events which he/she documents *and* interpret the place which such events have in the phenomena under investigation.'

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This leads us on to the position of theory in the research process within figural sociology.

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<sup>26</sup> Maguire, p. 190.

<sup>27</sup> Dunning, p. 252.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 252.

<sup>29</sup> Maguire, p. 191.

<sup>30</sup> Maguire, p. 191.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 192; emphasis in the original. Although, event is an inappropriate term because it has static connotations. As such, 'process' is more accurate and more consistent with a figural approach.



### Narrative and theory from a figural perspective

Silverman argues that some researchers regard their work as the generation of theory (an inductive approach), whereas others consider that their research is used in order to 'test' existing theories (a deductive approach).<sup>32</sup> However, for Elias, such a conceptualisation represents something of a false dichotomy. Indeed, Elias argues that, 'the separation of theory and method proves to be based on misconception'.<sup>33</sup> That is to say, Elias recognised that human thought processes are an intricate and continuous combination of movements from the specific to different levels of generality and *vice-versa*. The inductive/deductive approach is a formalistic, simplistic and distorting characterisation of this process. As outlined already above, theory is bound to influence and have implications for one's choice of methods. In response to this, Maguire plausibly argues that, if researchers aspire to generate explanations with a reasonable degree of adequacy, they 'must conduct a dialogue between what Abrams (1982) terms the interwoven styles of *narrative* and *theoretical* writing'.<sup>34</sup> This is also in keeping with Elias's concerns that we distance ourselves as much as is possible from our own values. To this end, Dunning argues that if our aim is to 'test' theory, rather than simply to 'apply' it, then we are likely to achieve greater levels of detachment. That is to say, if we approach research in a frame of mind that is more committed to a desire to understand more adequately rather than a greater commitment to sustaining pre-formed views, then we are more likely to want to test as opposed to confirm theories. However, it is not so straightforward as suggesting that we must 'test' the figural approach through empirical research. Research is also guided by the theory. In this respect, figural sociology

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<sup>32</sup> Silverman, David (2000) *Doing Qualitative Research: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage. Silverman, David (2001, second edition) *Interpreting qualitative data: Methods for analysing talk, text, and interaction*. London : Sage.

<sup>33</sup> Elias, *What is Sociology?*, p. 58.

<sup>34</sup> Maguire, p. 192; emphasis in the original.

'commits researchers to ... work on the empirical without dominating it with theory and, at the same time, develop theoretical insights firmly informed by evidence. An uninterrupted two-way traffic takes place.'<sup>35</sup>

In other words, figurational sociologists advocate an ongoing relationship between theory and research in which both are refined in respect to one another through a 'combination of reflection, experience and practice'.<sup>36</sup> Theory should be treated as a sensitising agent, one that is open to modification if it is found to be relatively unproductive or too limiting. The aim, then, is 'to develop theoretically-grounded empirical work'.<sup>37</sup>

Having outlined the 'theoretical underpinnings' guiding figurational research, it is now necessary to discuss the distinctions between one's chosen 'research strategy', 'research design' and 'research methods'. The research strategy concerns whether the approach will be qualitative, quantitative or both. The research design, for example, relates to the framework for the collection and analysis of data, such as a research case study or cross-sectional design. Research method refers to the data generation tools, for example, interviewing, documentary analysis and questionnaires. It is now appropriate to discuss the research strategy, before outlining appropriate figurational research design and methods.

## **Research strategy**

Figuralists hold that the arguments presented for adopting a qualitative or a quantitative research strategy is a false dichotomy. That is to say, since quantitative research rests on qualitative assumption at the initial and interpretative stages, it is

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<sup>35</sup> Maguire, p. 188.

<sup>36</sup> May, Tim (2001) *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Process*. Buckingham: Open University Press, p. 29.

<sup>37</sup> Dunning, Eric et al. (1988) *The roots of Football Hooliganism: An Historical and Sociological Study*. London: Routledge, p. 267.

inadequate to argue that one's strategy can be one or the other. Furthermore, figurationalists argue that the methodological framework flows from the nature of the problem to be investigated, and as such it is inappropriate to be limited on the basis of any particular individual strategy. In this regard, it is important to note that figurational sociologists advocate that the researcher must utilise the most appropriate research tool to address their research question.

Of greater concern for figurational sociologists is that the research strategy is processual, as has already been argued, Elias often complained about 'the retreat of sociologists into the present'.<sup>38</sup> In order to make sense of what is happening in the present, we need to know something of the past. We are who we are only because of the influences in our past that have shaped us – consciously and otherwise. As Blok argues 'one way to disencumber oneself from the reified abstractions which still loom large in conventional sociological and anthropological analysis is to shift one's focus from a short-term to a long-term perspective'.<sup>39</sup>

Bryman argues that there are numerous steps in adopting a research strategy.<sup>40</sup> The first step concerns the generation of 'general research question(s)'. Then the researcher is able to move on to 'selecting relevant site(s) and subjects' that are well suited to enabling the researcher to develop adequate answers to the questions raised. Not surprisingly, the next step is the 'collection of relevant data' and then the interpretation of that data. Then the researcher is in a position to map these findings within their 'conceptual and theoretical framework'. The main research question for the research that forms the case study for this paper was: 'To what extent is an Americanisation thesis an adequate explanation for globalising processes in sport'? The research focus was specifically on the development of baseball in England, whilst complimenting this with a broader analysis of largely secondary sources of the development of baseball in several

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<sup>38</sup> Elias, Norbert (1987) 'The Retreat of Sociologists into the Present.' *Theory, Culture and Society*, 4: pp. 223-249, 223.

<sup>39</sup> Blok, Anton (1988, reprint from 1974, with a foreword by Charles Tilly) *The Mafia of a Sicilian Village, 1860-1960: A study of violent peasant entrepreneurs*. Prospect Heights: Waveland Press, pp. xxviii-xxix.

<sup>40</sup> Bryman, pp. 267-8.

other parts of the world. It is to the issues relating to a figural research design that we now turn. This will be specifically outlined regarding how such a design could be devised in order to address the above research question.

## **Research design**

### Case study research: Baseball in England

Denscombe argues that the rationale 'behind concentrating efforts on one case rather than many is that there may be insights to be gained from looking at the individual case that can have wider implications and, importantly, that would not have come to light through the use of a research strategy that tried to cover a large number of instances'.<sup>41</sup> Such a research design is consistent with figurationalists' contention that employing a case study design offers great potential for extrapolation from the particular to the general. However, if the focus were solely on one case study, then the researcher would not be in a position to appreciate the wider applicability of the findings. As Blok argues, a case study is 'appropriate as a locus for study', but it must also be recognised that many of the identifiable characteristics of a case study 'are dependent upon and a reflex of the larger society and can only be explained with reference to their specific connections with it'.<sup>42</sup> As such, it is argued, where possible this kind of research should be combined with a cross-sectional research design. In the case study presented here, this was specifically undertaken in order to illuminate the extent to which the position of baseball in England was consistent, or otherwise, with the global baseball figuration. In this respect, it is argued, combining a 'case-study' design with a 'cross-sectional' design is crucial for more object-adequate conclusions to be drawn.

Bryman argues that the case study design tends, though not necessarily, to contain longitudinal elements. As has already been discussed, this is particularly appropriate for a figural understanding. For example, in order to develop a more reality-congruent

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<sup>41</sup> Denscombe, Martin (1998) *The Good Research Guide*. Buckingham: Open University Press, p. 30.

<sup>42</sup> Blok, p. xxvii.

understanding of the position of baseball in England today – and to make sense of globalising processes more generally – we need to know something of the past. Hence, with this realisation in mind, the study traced the development of baseball in England over 125 years utilising 'archival information and by retrospective interviewing',<sup>43</sup> which is discussed more fully below. It was possible to utilise a wide range of research methods within this case study. This is something that Denscombe, amongst others, considers a major strength of the case study approach. The multi-methods involved in what has frequently come to be referred to as 'triangulation': a methodological technique 'allow[ing] findings to be corroborated or questioned by comparing the data produced by different methods'.<sup>44</sup> This can enhance the validity of the data. Although qualitative analysis of newspapers, for example, might enable substantial conclusions to be drawn, such research could not be regarded as reliable on its own. As such, this could be supported by other research methods. In the example of figurational research outlined here, the newspaper analysis was buttressed with semi-structured oral history interviews. This enabled the researcher to corroborate conclusions drawn from the newspaper research, but also fill in the gaps in this research.

Denscombe argues that the case study approach enables a greater 'tendency to emphasize the detailed workings of the relationships and social processes, rather than to restrict attention to the outcomes from these'.<sup>45</sup> However, as has been outlined, unless these findings are located within the broader figuration, the case study is of only limited use. As such, the research discussed here moved between the national case study and the global process. Such an approach will cast light on both these levels.

#### Cross-sectional research: Baseball around the world

Cross-sectional analysis was used to study the variations in the receptivity and responses to baseball in different countries. However, it is unlikely that all researchers are realistically in a position to cover all research ground. As such, the cross sectional analysis was limited primarily to utilising secondary sources. Analysis centred on socio-

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<sup>43</sup> Bryman, p. 51.

<sup>44</sup> Denscombe, p. 85.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p. 31.

historical secondary sources regarding baseball in several parts of the world, to provide a processual understanding of the development of the sport. This was combined with a questionnaire, which provided a picture of the origins of baseball in the respective countries and the current situation regarding baseball across the globe. With this in mind, it seems appropriate to provide a more detailed overview of the specific methods utilised within the research—to highlight the figurational approach to research *methods*.

## Research methods<sup>46</sup>

### Documentary analysis: Analysis of the press

In 1981, Platt indicated that, 'discussions of the use of documents in the standard methodological literature are sparse and patchy'.<sup>47</sup> Over twenty years on this remains the case. However, when engaged in socio-historical analysis, documentary analysis can be an extremely useful research tool. Extensive archival newspaper analysis can help us build a picture of the past, as well as subsequent developments. As Mann appropriately points out, 'documents' are an aspect of 'our (and other people's) history'.<sup>48</sup> As such, he argues, 'to ignore documents is to cut off sociology from the whole process of social change, which is one of the fundamental concepts of the discipline itself'.<sup>49</sup> Although, this might be overstating the case, it does indicate nonetheless the importance of using documents in social research. As May argues, documents may illuminate some of the 'aspirations and intentions' of people during 'the periods to which they refer and describe places and social relationships at a time when we may not have been born, or were simply not present'.<sup>50</sup> Newspaper articles in this sense are particularly useful.

We may consider the majority of articles written in newspapers to be 'primary sources', since more often than not we would expect the journalist responsible for them to have been present at the event covered. They represent knowledge by 'acquaintance'.<sup>51</sup> 'It is therefore assumed', May argues, 'that they are more likely to be an accurate representation of occurrences in terms of both memory of the author (time) and their

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<sup>46</sup> By simply providing the following summaries of the specific methods used within this particular research project, it is not assumed that these methods, or the general approach to the methods, are somehow unique or exclusive to a figurational approach. Rather that the summaries provide an illustration of how a figurational informed approach would make use of these methods.

<sup>47</sup> Platt, Jennifer (1981) 'Evidence and Proof in Documentary Research: 1 Some Specific Problems of Documentary Research.' *Sociological Review*, 29: pp. 31-52, 31.

<sup>48</sup> Mann, Peter (1985, second edition) *Methods of Social Investigation*. Oxford: Blackwell, p. 94.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid, p. 95.

<sup>50</sup> May, p. 176.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 180.

proximity (space)'.<sup>52</sup> However, this is not to say, of course, that we can assume that what is written in a newspaper is a more-or-less object-adequate account of the events described. From a figurational standpoint, it might be argued that a journalist is likely to be too involved, and would thus provide a specific 'we' perspective. As such, there is likely to be an evident bias within the text. But this can serve to provide another use for the newspaper article to research: namely the perceptions and attitudes of those in established positions.

In respect to the research within the case presented here, comprehensive research of newspaper coverage of baseball in England allowed comparative analysis of the balance and conjecture within different newspapers during different time periods. Furthermore, content analysis of several different newspapers and their coverage (or lack thereof) of baseball in England allowed the researcher to begin to make sense of what might be regarded as the 'established groups' mediated attitudes toward baseball at various different times. To this end, the newspaper coverage can serve 'both as the main source' for conclusion's 'and to supplement information from other sources' and *vice versa*.<sup>53</sup>

Newspaper coverage of baseball proved useful as both a direct and an indirect source of information. The information contained in various newspaper articles relating to baseball provided further, direct information regarding the periods when baseball was played. In addition,

'the message can itself convey indirect information about, say, the ideals aimed at, the standard terminology used in a particular place or period, the kinds of subterfuges engaged in, or the sort of images likely to appeal to the intended market.'<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p. 180.

<sup>53</sup> Finnegan, R. (1996) 'Using Documents.' In: Roger Sapsford & Victor Jupp (eds.) *Data Collection and Analysis*. London: Sage, p. 138.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 143.



Hence, as well as making sense of what 'messages' a particular journalist or editor may be trying to convey, documents like newspapers 'may be interesting for what they leave out, as well as what they contain'.<sup>55</sup> Thus, the lack of coverage of baseball by some newspapers, at times when the game was drawing crowds equal to, if not higher, than cricket matches tells us something about the position of baseball compared to cricket in a journalist or editors opinion. As May reasonably argues, 'they do not simply reflect, but also construct social reality and versions of events'.<sup>56</sup> And, as Fenton, Bryman, Deacon and Birmingham argue, journalists

'necessarily exercise value judgements in selecting and filtering the information they receive and in directing their news gathering. They are active participants in the production process'.<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, as Dunning, Murphy and Williams point out in relation to their research of the press reporting of football hooliganism, it must be recognised that the press are not 'neutral agents [who] simply report events'<sup>58</sup>. Therefore, newspaper analysis can be useful, not only as a source of descriptive information, but also for the researcher to gain knowledge of the 'position' of the press, so to speak, in relation to journalists' impressions. In this respect, Dunning et al. argue that the media 'help to shape the attitudes and perceptions of ... the general public'<sup>59</sup>. Hence, newspaper analysis might help us explain why some sports, for example, seemingly capture the public's imagination and why others find it difficult to enjoy any sustained popularity.

Having made clear in the above section some of the potential strengths and weaknesses of documentary analysis, it might be argued that a more general advantage in carrying out an extensive review of newspaper archive material on baseball allows for 'indefinite replicability'.<sup>60</sup> The replicability of carrying out the same kind of newspaper

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<sup>55</sup> May, p. 183.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 183.

<sup>57</sup> Natalie Fenton, Natalie et al. (1988) *Mediating Social Science*. London: Sage, p. 95.

<sup>58</sup> Dunning et al., p. 8.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

<sup>60</sup> May, p. 184.

analysis to test results, so to speak, goes some way to addressing the problem of reliability.

In terms of the practicalities of the newspaper analysis carried out, it must be recognised that the research process is rarely, if ever, as clean and straightforward as various research methods texts might have us believe. Research, in actual fact, is a very messy process. Bryman points out in this connection that, 'the search for documents relevant to your research can often be a frustrating and highly protracted process'.<sup>61</sup> This was certainly the case with the analysis of newspaper coverage of baseball in England. The fact that the sport has only ever been played as a significantly 'minority sport', meant that newspaper coverage was often sparse and extremely sporadic.

There are some indexes to newspapers, for example the *Palmer's Index to The Times* and, from 1905, *The Index to The Times*, that can be used to make the arduous task of researching archival newspapers more streamlined. However, in the case of the research into baseball in England, these were not always reliable. For example, various reports on baseball were found in *The Times* that received no mention in either of the indexes. Therefore, more comprehensive and time-consuming research of the newspapers was still required. A review of local newspapers proved more problematic and time consuming because no such indexes exist, and the location of sports reporting, for example, was rarely consistent—at least not until the 1950s. As a result, the research process in this regard is not straightforward and devising a 'system' for researching the newspapers not particularly easy.

#### Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews lend themselves particularly well to a figurational approach, not least because if used in conjunction with other research methods they can help establish if data already uncovered corroborates with the knowledge of the interviewee. In addition, and perhaps of greater importance, semi-structured interviews can be used in order to acquire particular information, which might fill in gaps in the research. To this end, the interviewer is able to seize upon any opportunity where the interviewee could

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<sup>61</sup> Bryman, p. 370.

elaborate on points of interest without being restricted to the rigidity of a more structured interview. As Bryman argues, what is crucial here is that the questioning allows the researcher to 'glean the ways in which research participants view(ed) their social world'.<sup>62</sup> In the research on baseball, 'oral history interview' subjects, for example, were 'asked to reflect upon specific events or periods in the past';<sup>63</sup> namely, when they were involved as players of baseball. Not surprisingly, as Bryman points out, 'the chief problem with the oral history interview ... is the possibility of bias introduced by memory lapses and distortions'.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, from a figurational point of view, it is important to consider the 'we' perspective adopted by interviewees, and this is yet another reason why a figurational approach advocates a more eclectic stance on methods. This is in order to develop a more adequate 'they' perspective as a researcher. Thus, in the research on baseball the researcher attempted to avoid distortions by means of triangulating the respondents comments with documentary analysis - as is outlined above - and also, in the case of the cross-sectional analysis of the development of baseball across the world with some basic questionnaires sent to all national governing bodies (NGBs) of baseball.

### Questionnaires

Questionnaires can be a useful tool to the social researcher. They can provide a broad range of information from a diverse group of people. And this is especially useful alongside more in-depth, detailed, but narrower research methods. Indeed, combining a questionnaire - that might involve quantitative data - with qualitative, semi-structured interviews, provides a good illustration of when a figurational sociological stance to research does not limit the approach to either a quantitative or a qualitative research strategy. In the case of the research on baseball, the principal reason for surveying all national governing body members of the International Baseball Federation (IBAF) was to attempt to build a broader picture of the diffusion of baseball, and the socio-historical development of the game on a global scale. This kind of information would be impossible to collect with a more in-depth, qualitative approach. The advantages drawn from the use

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<sup>62</sup> Bryman, p. 317.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 316.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 316.

of the questionnaire in this case clearly lay in the fact that a standard databank of information could be built on each NGB for baseball around the world.

Although there has not been time to discuss other methods open to the researcher, it is clear that participant and non-participant observation studies, for example, would fit in to a figurational approach. Not surprisingly, one might conclude that a figurational approach to research would advocate the use of the whole range of research methods, and not be restricted to certain types of research that ‘fit in’ with the theory. However, it is recognised this is more often than not simply not possible in most research projects, but this does not mean that the researcher should necessarily choose only one research method. It seems more adequate to actively choose a range of research methods that would appear to best suit the research question under investigation.

### **Concluding points**

To summarise, it is clear that a figurational approach to research methods does conflict with several, more orthodox, tacit assumptions within social science research. Elias was invariably at odds with other sociologists regarding the orthodox language and its uses within sociology, and the same is true here. This is not to deny that figurational sociologists are dismissive of conventional approaches to research methods, rather that they raise important questions about the value of assumptions made concerning the research process. It is simply not adequate to suggest that research can occur in the regimented way in which many social science research methods textbooks would have us believe. To deny this fact is not to suggest that methods are unimportant. Rather, they are of such importance that it is proposed that we do justice to the complexity - or 'messy nature' - of conducting research rather than try to over-simplify the process into more easily manageable, compartmentalised, dichotomous ways of thinking.

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