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## Norbert Elias's extended theory of community: from established/outsider relations to the gendered we-I balance

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### Abstract

Norbert Elias and John Scotson's analysis of the interconnection between positive and negative community identities in *The Established and the Outsiders* is well-known. Elias's subsequent writing about community offers a more rounded analysis, going beyond established/outsider configurations by exploring community's gendered character and the forces involved in the 'we-I balance' that counteract the pervasive process of individualization. Elias's use of personal pronouns to reveal how community identity ('we') relates not only to outsiders ('they') but also to an individual member ('I') of communities is central to his extended theory of community.

Keywords: community, Elias, insider/outsider, gender, we-I balance

### Introduction

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, community researchers faced three broad critiques that focussed on their alignment with functionalist theories and their normative predisposition to find social cohesion and order, or on their alignment with the rural-urban continuum and its geographical determinism, or on their adoption of a descriptive, atheoretical approach (Crow 2014, 2018). In this context, Philip Abrams lamented that the word 'community' had been used in so many different ways that it had 'become almost devoid of precise meaning' (1978, p.13). He did not, however, advise abandoning the concept of community as unworkable in empirical research. Rather, he drew inspiration from a small number of path-breaking studies which offered the prospect of 'rejuvenation' (Bulmer 1985). Abrams praised in particular the work of Norbert Elias and John Scotson (1965) and John Rex and Robert Moore (1967) for the analytical clarity informing their empirical investigations (Bulmer 1986, pp.35, 39). These studies of relations between 'established' community 'insiders' and 'outsiders' or 'immigrants' re-set agendas through their focus on community relationships' dynamic character in which divisions featured alongside solidarity. They have become standard points of reference in community sociology and researchers continue to build on these foundations.

This article focuses on Elias's return to the subject of community relationships at various points in his later writings, in the course of which he developed a broader understanding of their operation and significance. These insights have not reached such a wide audience as Elias and Scotson's highly-cited account of established/outsider configurations. Elias's argument that identification and engagement with collectivities survives the process of individualization is mentioned by Nickie Charles, Charlotte Davies and Christopher Harris (2008, pp.12-13), for example, but they are unusual among community sociologists in this respect. Nevertheless, Elias's broader set of ideas deserve attention. Researchers in the field may largely employ other analytical frameworks in their investigations (most notably the various formulations of 'social capital' deployed by Pierre Bourdieu, Robert

Putnam and others (Crow 2018, pp.73-4)), but Elias's extended theory of community continues to offer something distinctive, at least as a starting point for further discussion. In particular, his evolving thinking led him to the idea of the 'we-I balance' as a way of understanding how community relationships continue to play a vital role in what he called *The Society of Individuals* (Elias 1991). This is one of several important respects in which Elias's extended theory of community goes beyond that found in *The Established and The Outsiders*.

Elias's theme of established/outsider relations gained attention because there is a long history of geographical and social mobility disrupting residential patterns. Newcomers' integration into local networks is far from automatic, and their on-going stigmatization and exclusion by established groups is a matter of enduring concern, especially where the newcomers have a racial or ethnic minority profile (May 2004; Dench, Gavron & Young 2005). Elias extended his insights into community relationships in thought-provoking ways that advance a more rounded theory of community. This article revisits the study that established Elias's reputation as a theorist of community, setting out how it provided a basis for subsequent extension. It then explores his thinking's further dimensions. He continued to work at these ideas throughout his long retirement, and his formulation of the 'we-I balance' was published only three years before his death. Elias's extended theory of community may not be as widely-acknowledged as his book with Scotson, but the potential remains for his approach being used to stimulate the sociological imagination (Eldridge 2015, p.11) as researchers endeavour to make sense of contemporary community phenomena. This re-examination of Elias's thinking invites consideration of points of connection to other theorists, for example those identified by Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992, pp.92-3) and by Zygmunt Bauman (Bauman 1990, pp.30, 49; Smith 2001, ch.6).

### Elias's first theory of community

Elias's hallmark focus on human interdependencies is well-suited to community research. The community study co-written with his student John Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders*, was presented as 'configurational theory in action' (1965, p.171). Other local research projects with which Elias had been involved before his retirement did not result in publications that bore the imprint of this thinking, nor indeed even his name as an author (O'Connor & Goodwin 2012). *The Established and the Outsiders* was slow to achieve recognition but it did feature in reviews of community studies by Margaret Stacey (1969) and by Colin Bell and Howard Newby (1971). The latter authors included much of the book's Conclusion in their edited collection (Bell & Newby 1974) to exemplify how social network analysis could be applied. This relatively-muted reception among UK-based sociologists compared unfavourably to the growing enthusiasm found in the Netherlands and Elias's native Germany (Bauman 1979).

Scotson's M.A. thesis research in suburban Leicester had been supervised by Elias. It provided Elias with 'a vehicle for the development of his own theorising' (Mennell 1992, p.116), offering 'an opportunity further to develop some of the ideas he originally formed in his earlier work on civilising processes' (Hughes & Goodwin

2016, p.8). Elias's description of 'a community study in Leicestershire which I undertook, together with J. L. Scotson' (1974, p.xv; see also 1998a, p.105) implies extensive involvement in the project, and he was evidently familiar with the fieldwork site. The argument advanced about community solidarity's connectedness to hierarchy, division and exclusion showed the value of analysing social relationships as 'chains of interdependence that link people together' (Elias 1978, p.131). The book was used to characterise British urban sociology's emerging focus on 'conflicts in process' (Eldridge 1980, ch.11), and Abrams praised its analysis of 'the rules of bonding' (Bulmer 1986, p.35). Martin Albrow regarded the book's treatment of geographical mobility as 'a prescient forerunner of globalization research' (1997, p.42). The book has gone on to be cited extensively.

Like many community studies, *The Established and the Outsiders* had a long gestation period. The fieldwork began in the 1950's (Goodwin, Hughes & O'Connor 2016, p.20). The authors mention the research taking at least three years, and data on delinquency among children (Scotson's original focus) for the period 1958-60 were presented (1965, pp.ix, 137). Typical of community studies, the range of topics in the book was extensive, including 'economic, historical, political, religious, administrative and other aspects' (Elias & Scotson 1965, pp.xiii, 146) of local life. Demonstrating the connectedness of these elements of community that come together 'as a unit with a specific structure' (Elias 1965, p.186) necessarily took time.

As its title indicates, *The Established and the Outsiders* analysed division within a community according to length of residence. It was apparent that the community given the pseudonym Winston Parva was split into three distinct zones according to the age and quality of the housing, built from the 1880s onwards. It was unsurprising that the length of time that people and their families had lived in the area varied between the zones, but the authors were intrigued by 'the fact that length of residence can be a factor in the ranking of families and groups'. Other researchers had already reported that 'prestige' was associated with long-established groups while more recent arrivals were subject to 'reproach', but Elias and Scotson offered a new explanation of this pattern. In the local configuration, the newcomers were disadvantaged relative to the established residents because the latter possessed three things that the newcomers lacked: an established network of local connections, an established sense of belonging to and ownership of 'the village' in which they lived, and a sense of superiority instilled in them from childhood. The newcomers were diverse in their places of origin, lacked 'unifying norms' and had 'little solidarity and cohesion' (1965, pp.2, 3, 73, 87) some two decades after their arrival. Although heterogeneous, they were lumped together and stigmatised, defined less by what they were than by what they were not. They were treated as 'outsiders' to the local establishment.

Elias and Scotson were surprised that the outsiders rarely challenged their assignation of inferior status by the established group, often tolerated it, and sometimes concurred with it. Their initial observations led them to construct a 'hypothetical model' that further fieldwork served to confirm: 'the image which the "established"... have of themselves and communicate to others tends to be modelled on the "minority of the best"... The image of "outsiders"... tends to be modelled on

the “minority of the worst” (1965, pp.7, 159). Powerful groups idealise their own image and denigrate the reputation of less-powerful groups, thereby exaggerating the distance between them. The key mechanism for doing this was informal: gossip, known also as ‘the community grapevine’ (Elias 1974, p.xxviii). Operating among both the established and outsider populations, it could take the form of ‘praise-gossip’, ‘supporting gossip’, ‘blame-gossip’ or ‘rejecting-gossip’ (Elias & Scotson 1965, pp.92-3), and had the capacity to either enhance or tarnish reputations. It was most powerful where both groups internalised beliefs about the established group being naturally superior.

It was not until the book’s Conclusion that reference was made to what has become Elias’s most celebrated work, *The Civilising Process* (2000), first published in 1939 in German. The influence of its core idea in the analysis of the Winston Parva data made *The Established and the Outsiders* stand out from the more descriptive community studies of the time. Elias and Scotson’s agenda was unashamedly comparative and theoretical. The established population of this small suburban area in the mid-twentieth century could be likened to groups in other times and places such as nobles at royal courts in centuries past who promoted ‘civilised’ behaviour: ‘Circles of old families usually have a code of conduct which demands... a higher degree of self-restraint than that usual among interdependent groups of lesser status’. Exercising self-restraint is important in the maintenance of claims to superiority and the reinforcement of ‘specific emotional bonds’ that allow privileged groups ‘to stand together’ (1965, pp.152, 154, 155). Outsiders find less appeal in self-restraint according to other people’s norms, particularly if they judge that their prospects of becoming accepted as ‘civilised’ remain open to doubt however hard they try to conform to established norms, simply because of their background.

This theme of community relationships requiring self-restraint on the part of their participants was not fully-developed in *The Established and the Outsiders*. Elias would later revisit it. Without self-restraint, it would be impossible to achieve ‘the we-balance’ (Elias 1991), a key aspect of group organization, not least the synchronisation of working together. A connected point left underdeveloped in the book relates to the basis of community’s appeal. The observation was made that in times of great change ‘one is apt to seek refuge in the image of a social order which never changes and projects itself into a past that never was’. This critique of romanticising the past connects to Elias’s concern over value judgements. The position was expressed in the comment that ‘It is one thing to make confession of one’s political faith, another to make a sociological enquiry’ (Elias & Scotson 1965, pp.160, 170). In taking this position of detachment rather than involvement, Elias flagged his long-standing interest in how people understand the social world, and sometimes misperceive it from partisan standpoints.

Other passages in the book also anticipated further reflection to come. The gendered nature of community is prominent in these. A provocative thought experiment mentioned in passing was that ‘It is difficult to imagine communities without women and children, though one can imagine communities almost without men’ (Elias & Scotson 1965, pp.146-7). Winston Parva was clearly unlike those traditional working-class communities that had an extreme type of gendered division of labour in which

women were full-time housewives while men's lives were workplace-focussed, but it was left unexplained why a comparatively high rate of female employment in Winston Parva did not prompt realignment of the relationship between the sexes in community roles. Elias and Scotson deserve credit not only for their analysis of established/outsider cleavages in communities but also for identifying other research opportunities. They did this by drawing attention to intriguing characteristics of communities concerning their gendered patterning, which we consider in the next section, before going on to consider the processes through which community comes to be prioritised over the individual. Elias reflected further on these connected questions during his extraordinarily-productive retirement.

#### Further reflections on the gendered character of community relationships

Elias's extended theory of community cannot be found comprehensively stated in one place. It has to be pieced together from scattered writings in which he returned to reconsider community relationships. A 1964 conference paper on 'group charisma' (Elias 1998a) indicated unfinished business. His 1968 Postscript to *The Civilizing Process* criticised Talcott Parsons's acceptance of the shift from 'community' to 'society' (2000, p.453) put forward by Ferdinand Tönnies (1957) and the corresponding move away from 'affectivity' that Parsons posited, which neglected people's 'whole gamut of emotional needs' (1978, p.135) such as that for sociability. In the 1970s he produced two extended discussions. One, 'Towards a theory of communities' (Elias 1974), was written in his capacity as editor of the series in which Bell and Newby's collection *The Sociology of Community* appeared. The other was the Introduction to *The Established and the Outsiders* brought out in Dutch in 1976 (not available in English until 1994 with the book's posthumous republication (Elias 1994a)). Neither of these long essays employed sub-headings, confirming that it can be 'quite demanding' (Mennell 1992, p.22) to follow Elias's reasoning.

Themes relevant to Elias's evolving understanding of community relationships also figure elsewhere. Among these, 'Changes in the We-I Balance' (Elias 1991, Pt III) stands out. Despite a lukewarm reception from Leicester colleagues (Elias 1994b, pp.66-7; Bryant 1995, pp.66-7), Elias persevered with the sociological analysis of personal pronouns, arguing that there 'can be no 'I' without 'he', 'she', 'we', 'you' or 'they'. It is plainly very misleading to use such concepts as 'I' or ego independently of their position within the web of relationships to which the rest of the pronouns refer' (1978, p.124). This line of thinking came to fullest fruition in 1987, the year of his ninetieth birthday, when the discussion of individualization and the balance between 'we-identity' and 'I-identity' (1991, p.156) was published (in German). His evolving views on identity were assisted by long-term engagement with 'the question of the social formation of the personality' (Burkitt 1991, p.184) and his developing analysis of the place of emotions in the formation and regulation of the self. The comment that people need to strike an appropriate 'balance between self-restraint and self-fulfilment' (2011, p.174) concluded one of his final works.

The rationale underpinning Elias's further work on community was that 'the theoretical aspects of community studies are less advanced than the empirical work in that field' (1974, p.ix). The view stated in *The Established and the Outsiders* that

'the crucial test for the fruitfulness or sterility of a sociological theory is the fruitfulness or sterility of empirical enquiries stimulated by and based on it' (Elias & Scotson 1965, p.171) echoed points expressed throughout his career (Elias 1974, pp.xvi-xvii, xxxvii; 1983, p.22; 1994b, pp.92-3; 2000, p.366). Although Elias would never again engage in the analysis of ethnographic fieldwork data as Scotson and he had done in the Winston Parva study, he nevertheless remained concerned not to be seen as someone with 'a predilection for theoretical excursions' (Elias & Scotson 1965, p.23) or an attachment to 'wild theorizing' (1974, p.xxxviii). Theoretical reflections were undertaken to generate 'powerful lines of enquiry, explanation and debate' (van Krieken 1998, p.171). He drew on material that revealed an encyclopaedic knowledge, from the ancient world to contemporary Africa (and various points in between), to illustrate his arguments.

Elias's broad analysis of social change treated communities as social units shaped by forces unfolding at the macro level. Superficially this resembled the theory of societal evolution advanced by Parsons, with whom he had much in common but also key points of disagreement (Smith 2001, ch.4). Elias's broad contention that communities develop 'in the slipstream of changes of the larger units' such as state formation and society-wide differentiation of roles was unexceptional. The general pattern involved movement away from all-embracing networks of local interconnection towards 'lengthening of the chains of interdependencies'. In discussing this process whereby 'the structure and pattern of interdependencies between people who have their home in the same locality change with the development of societies', Elias paid particular attention to the uneven effect on women and men. Opportunities in the wider public sphere were greater for men, while in women's lives 'The dominance of private and personal concerns.... was noticeably stronger'. Women's limited access to the public sphere was long-established, and 'women, by comparison with their men, tend to be more closely bonded by community ties' (1974, pp.xxxiv, xxi, xx, xxvii). As a result, women have greater involvement in community networks.

Elias argued that the shift away from 'predominantly agrarian communities' saw the accentuation of the distinction between public and private spheres. It fell primarily to women to perform the private function of 'handing on the basic orientation and skills of one generation to another and with it the communal sense of identity'. Meeting community members' 'needs for human bonds beyond the family level' promotes social integration: people have a 'need for company and good cheer, in familiar surroundings where they can feel at home'. It is women who 'are more likely to become involved in the network of personal relationships' in which 'emotive undercurrents' need to be managed. It was among these networks that 'gossip circuits' (1974, pp.xx, xxi, xxvii, xxix, xxvii, xx) operated. Gossip drove the circulation of praiseworthy and stigmatising information about community members. This appeared to give women a degree of power within communities, but it involved monitoring and safeguarding community standards, and greater 'susceptibility to the pressure of their we-group' (1994a, p.xli) ensued.

Community's gendered character had been touched on in *The Established and the Outsiders* but its treatment there remained underdeveloped. At the time of the study,

sociologists known to Elias were already discussing the significance of the growth of married women's employment and of residential mobility (Jephcott 1962; Young & Willmott 1957), although expectations of rapid change would not have convinced him. Elias and Scotson's account of local employment highlighted its compatibility with 'mother-centred family networks' and in particular continued female responsibility for child-care. Working in a factory near to their home enabled 'younger women to leave their children with "granny" or an elderly aunt while they went to work'. The phenomenon of older relatives taking on child-care responsibilities was treated as 'part of a woman's role and inclination'. This care was also mentioned as a reason for women with dependent children who had been geographically mobile to return to Winston Parva in order 'to be "near mum"'. No instances of men being similarly central to kinship groups were found, despite the researchers having actively 'looked out for' (1965, pp.31-2, 46, 47, 45) such cases.

In developing a general theory of communities, Elias treated matrilocalism as one of the 'basic structural characteristics' (1974, p.xv) of Winston Parva and of communities like it. Matrilocalism did not mean that women had more power than men. Elias's premise that every individual is part of a figuration of social relationships, that 'There is no one who is not and has never been interwoven into a network of people' (1978, p.128), did not imply that everyone was equally interconnected, nor that people in networks were equivalent. Elias recognised that community relationships involve 'power differentials'; this held in 'almost all cases'. In consequence they are 'unevenly reciprocal'. This has remained true of gender relations in communities despite erosion of the 'very pronounced patterns of dominance and subordination' characteristic of 'simpler societies'. Community relationships may have narrowed from being all-embracing to focussing on the more limited purview of informal sociability and 'private lives' (1974, pp.xx, xix, xxv, xxiv, xxvii), but gender inequalities persist. Only rarely (such as for a time in ancient Rome) was there evidence of deviation from 'a balance of power between the sexes tilted in favour of men'. The routine treatment of women as inferior meant that they constituted 'a distinct social group, ... a social network with conventions of its own' (1987b, pp.290, 301) that reflected this subordinate status through the lower-status tasks allocated to it.

Elias's explanation of community's gendered character involved re-stating his fundamental tenet that sociological analysis must avoid taking individuals as its starting point. His approach emphasised 'the peculiarly compelling nature of human bonds'. Social relationships constitute a 'whole groundwork of interdependencies which bind people to each other'. The language of 'bonds' and of 'chains' (1974, pp.xviii, xxvii) and elsewhere of 'traps' (Elias & Scotson 1965, p.23) conveyed that relationships are structural and cannot be changed simply by individual choice. Reflecting further on Winston Parva's established community, Elias described how members 'had undergone together a group process – from the past via the present towards the future – which provided them with a stock of common memories, attachments and dislikes'. Living together in the same place 'for two or three generations' gave the group a strong collective identity and shared knowledge of how each family and even each individual fitted into this social order. People's



respective rankings were 'known, as a matter of course, to everyone who belonged to the group, *especially to the ladies*' (1994a, p.xxxviii, emphasis added). Why such knowledge of local hierarchies should be gendered might be explained by the fact that 'In the case of women and children, until a short time ago, the division of their lives into a public and a private sphere was still less pronounced than in that of men' (1974, p.xxvii). This highlighting of the constraining connections between women, domesticity and community also figured in feminist analyses of the time (Wainwright 1978), although they would have disputed Elias's assessment that such phenomena take 'generations' (1994a, p.xlv) to change.

### Community ideals, individualization and the we-I balance.

Elias's explanations of social arrangements emphasised the enduring influence of historical legacies, and women's centrality to communities was no exception. Patterns from the past relating to the gendered split between public and private spheres would take time to loosen their grip. Psychological processes also contributed to people's 'submission to group-specific norms, to patterns of affect restraint characteristic of that group' in which group members (and women in particular) place the group ahead of the individual. Although it requires considerable 'self-regulation' (1994a, pp.xlv, xli) to live up to the ideals of groups convinced of their superiority, it offers the reward of sharing that group's status. Influenced by 'collective self-praise' and 'group charisma' and fearful of 'group disgrace' (1998a, p.107), people put collective ahead of individual agendas, prioritising their 'we-identity' over their 'I-identity' (1991, p.156). Elias and Scotson treated the value attached to 'collective pride' as deep-rooted. This 'anchorage' of 'individual identity' (1965, p.105) in that of the group is influential. For people whose lives continue to be centred on their communities of origin, 'group identity' remains integral to their 'personal identity'. Their 'image as an individual person' may be 'overshadowed' (1994a, p.xliii, l) by a more powerful we-image. This is why collectivities such as communities endure as vital components in people's lives.

Elias argued that the "'I-and-we" consciousness' (1978, p.137) that people acquire has a strong emotional element to it, attaching to symbols of collective identity such as national flags, but also to symbols at local levels. Involvement in neighbourhood relations teaches children about the social groups of which they are a part and those which they are outside, and how they are symbolised. Elias even opined that 'some of the children growing up in Winston Parva's rat alley (as it was called by the established group) probably suffered from a... tainted we-image and became deviants as a result' (1994a, p.l). Such we-identities are rooted in 'the individual civilising transformation of the person' undergone by children as they acquire the 'capacity for self-control and regulation of drives and affects... necessary to maintain oneself as an adult' (1998b, pp.202-3). This is reinforced by the 'charismatic claims' that communities make to possessing 'superior virtues' (1998a, p.108). Stigma and shame await members whose behaviour falls short of this ideal, and as a result of such group pressure 'the self-regulation of members of a closely knit established group is linked to the internal opinion of that group'. Put another way, 'individual self-control and group opinion are geared to each other'. People's 'susceptibility to the pressure of their we-group' (1994a, pp.xli, xlii, xli) matters.

Elias's development of the idea of 'the we-I balance' recognised that the relationship between a group and its members could change. The process of individualization and the coming of what he called 'the society of individuals' appeared to herald the triumph of the 'I' over the 'we'. In such a world 'the differences between people, their I-identity, are valued more highly than what they have in common, their we-identity. The former outweighs the latter'. The 'greater emphasis on the I-identity of the individual person' brings with it 'the detachment of that person from the traditional groupings'. Over centuries, 'the balance of we- and I-identity' shifted from the former to the latter and even produced 'cases of people whose we-identity was so weakened that they appeared to themselves as we-less-I's'. This is not a universal pattern, however. Counter-examples exist of 'a we-I balance in which the we has clear preponderance over the I', demanding 'the unconditional subordination of the I to the we, of the individual to the we-group' (1991, pp.156, 179, 196, 216). Elias cited family-based and religious organizations as examples of we-I balances markedly tilted towards the we. Such cases can take to the extreme the process whereby 'a member's self-image and self-respect are linked to what other members of the group think of him or her' (1994a, p.xl). The thrust of Elias's thinking is that in communities the we-I balance is tilted more towards the we for women than it is for men.

The association of women with the sphere of informal community relationships might be expected to decline as macro-level forces unfold, leaving past figurations exercising a waning influence. Another long-term process besides individualization that featured in Elias's comments on the gradual transformation of gendered community relationships was that of informalization. This discussion took the emerging relationship between the sexes to exemplify the relaxation of formal norms governing behaviour. The remark that 'In less than one hundred years... a really radical change has been accomplished' indicated the prolonged period needed for young people to learn to disregard the shame formerly associated with the transgression of the formality of the past. Such lack of concern for community norms became possible when people no longer 'took their own way of life, their own social conventions, entirely for granted' and instead 'became increasingly conscious that patterns of human life are highly diverse and changeable' (1996, pp.42, 31). Such circumstances prompted questioning of established arrangements.

Elias had elsewhere anticipated circumstances in which the power of gossip to reinforce group norms was undermined. He had adopted the traditional definition of community as 'a group of households situated in the same locality and linked to each other by functional interdependencies' but was aware that such arrangements could be subject to change. Thus, 'A locality ceases to have the character of a community if the interdependence of the people who live there is so slight, if their relative independence is so great, that they are no longer involved in the local gossip flow and remain indifferent to any gossip control'. Forces of constraint are only as powerful as the sanctions against transgression that underpin them, and Elias recognised that the power of place-based communities to command loyalty from their members may decline as people's interdependencies are stretched from local to regional, national and even trans-national levels. Furthermore, a line of cleavage may open up between 'groups which lose and groups which gain from these

changes', and where this happens the former group may constitute a residual population who lament the 'loss of identity, pride and meaning' (1974, pp. xix, xxviii, xxxiii, xxiii) of their local community attachments. By treating local communities as an interconnected subset of the wider society Elias's understanding was analytically-superior to Tönnies's (1957) posited opposition between 'community' and 'society'.

The corrosive effect of people's widening horizons on community attachments suggests a weakening basis for local we-identities. Awareness of alternative patterns of social organization may prompt the perception that living according to inherited community norms 'continuously hovers on the margins of boredom' because of its routine character and familiarity. In societies where people regularly travel beyond their residential area, the appeal of locality-based networks may come to be 'blunted by the narrowness of community circles' (1974, p.xxx). Such processes need to be matched by corresponding counter-influences if Elias's notion of we-I balance is to remain effective. Elias understood people's attachment to collectivities as resting on something other than rational foundations. The idea of people normally behaving rationally faced, he said, considerable 'evidence to the contrary'. Rather, 'group fantasies' which can be likened to a 'dream' (1994a, p.xxxvi) are involved, including we-identities deeply-rooted in people's pasts. The power of these symbols lies in their appeal to what people would like to be true: they can be described as a 'wish-dream', an example of which was 'the dream of the warm, friendly, spontaneous, harmonious kind of communal life, not clouded by too much self-consciousness, enjoyed by people in earlier times' (1998c, p.173). Reason was not prominent in such dreams. They are not challenged lightly, nor easily dislodged as bases for people's continued involvement in and commitment to community networks.

Elias was nevertheless consistently critical of romanticised perspectives on communities. People's 'wish of reviving once more the closer, warmer, more harmonious type of bonds between people vaguely attributed to past ages' was merely 'sentiment' (1974, p.xiii). He bemoaned the 'good past, bad present' format and people's preparedness to look 'mistrustfully on the bad present in the name of a better past' (1985, pp.16, 12). The historical record did not support such dreams, and they were unconvincing to a sociologist committed to being 'a destroyer of myths' (1978, ch.2). A degree of detachment was required in order to achieve a clearer perspective than people deeply-involved would be able to. Strongly-held we-identities gave Elias particular cause for concern where denigration of outsiders was associated with 'group self-love', where the demands made on individual members require altruism to the extent of being 'ready to risk their lives for the sake of their group' (1987a, p.xii). Such subordination of the individual to the group was as problematic as its mirror image, the 'we-less I' (1991, p.x), or 'the society-less person' brought about when 'individualisation goes too far' (2007, pp.23,17) and self-restraint gives way to impulsiveness.

Elias's analysis necessarily engaged with the question of determinism and people's freedom to act (1983, p.31). The idea that individuals might be reduced to slavishly following the dictates of the we-group like 'a collective of robots' concerned him. There was, he said, a degree of 'elasticity of the bonds linking a person's self-regulation to the regulating pressures of a we-group' allowing a degree of fluctuation

without ever reaching the 'zero-point' (1994a, p.xli) at either extreme. The extent to which people 'attune their conduct to that of others' (2000, p.367) is a matter of degree. In some cases, such as that of Winston Parva, the community members might be likened to 'puppets on a string' (1994a, p.lii), but in other writing Elias indicated that a greater degree of self-awareness and agency could be present. Having noted that it was erroneous in his view to think that 'human beings are always free to act, to interact, to form relationships as they like. In actual fact their ability to do this is limited' (1974, pp.xiii, xviii), he did allow for the possibility of 'self-distancing' (1978, p.122) through which people could arrive at a more sociologically-informed understanding of their embeddedness in social groups. The 'self-detachment involved in seeing one's own person as a person among others' (1994b, p.140) may go against the grain in societies characterised by individualization, but it is still possible for people to appreciate the shortcomings of 'the ideal of the self-reliant individual, of an individual without a group', and to behave accordingly. Self-restraint for the good of the group is one outcome of the process whereby 'People have to learn for themselves how to live with each other' (2011, pp.172, 174), balancing individual and group agendas, and prioritising the 'necessities of interdependence' over 'momentary inclinations' (2000, p.380). Other people besides professional sociologists may gain insight into the relationship between the I and the we, and act upon that insight.

#### Engaging with Elias's extended theory of community.

Elias's extended theory of community merits attention because it offers a sophisticated analysis of community involvement partly as an enduring legacy of past social configurations, partly as the outcome of continuing interdependencies, and partly as the expression of attachment to community symbols. It clearly resonates with the growing acknowledgement of community relationships' gendered nature. Elizabeth Roberts's oral history of working-class women in the fifty years from 1890 echoes Elias's we-I balance being tilted towards the we in its description of 'women who were disciplined, inhibited, conforming and who placed perceived familial and social needs before those of the individual' (1984, p.203). For a more recent period, Arlie Hochschild treats being 'overly concerned with the needs of *others*' as a gendered phenomenon, something producing in women an unhealthy 'false self' (1983, pp.195-6, emphasis in original) in which altruism and commitment to the good of the group is excessive. Hochschild treats families and communities as sites in which women practise 'altruistic surrender' (1978, p.100) by routinely putting others before themselves. There is a hidden cost attached to such behaviour where it extends to self-sacrifice (Gilligan 1982).

Elias's ideas about the gendered character of community phenomena require recognition of the informal nature of much community involvement. There is a history of community research focussing on formal organizations where involvement is more easily measured. Such organizations were found to be predominantly *male*-dominated in terms of membership and office-holding. The re-study of Banbury, for example, reported that 'In 1967 only a third of men but just over a half of women belonged to no association at all' (Stacey, Batstone, Bell & Murcott 1975, p.50). Such studies overlooked the informal activity involved in 'the daily interactions of

everyday life' such as the 'network management' that was undertaken largely by women at 'the interface of private and public worlds' (Richards 1990, p.180; see also Putnam 2000, p.94; Castells 1997, p.233; McKenzie 2015). This reorientation of the research agenda opens the way for engagement with Elias's analysis of how community interdependencies are gendered. Potential parallels to the stimulus to feminist thinking prompted by engagement with Bourdieu's ideas (Adkins & Skeggs 2005) can be noted.

Richard Sennett is one writer who has engaged explicitly with Elias's ideas, arguing against placing so much emphasis on shame as a driver of self-control because of what it led Elias to neglect. By focussing on people's concern to avoid demeaning outcomes, 'Elias underplays the pleasurable aspects of civility, and he turns a blind eye to its co-operative character' (2012, p.120). This theme of the less-repressive character of community relationships could also be developed by reference to feminist reassessments of gossip which have found it a more empowering phenomenon than the constraining one that Elias and Scotson portray. Gossiping and street life can be considered 'sources of neighbourly communication and mutual aid' (Lewis 1984, p.54). Melanie Tebbutt suggests that gossip gave women 'informal power', and served as 'a conduit for all sorts of useful information'; in the process it helped to make 'knowable' the community and its 'collective rhythm'. She also argues that research into the gendered use of language is relevant to understanding everyday community interaction, and in particular the contrast between 'a self-centred tendency in men's talk' and 'women's gossip [which] is more outward-looking and focussed on the experiences of other people' (1995, pp.10, 75, 97,14). The idea that talk of collectivities and co-operation downplays individuals provides an interesting point of potential dialogue with Elias's analysis of the we-I balance, but suggests that his conceptualisation of gossip needs some revision.

These differences in language may in turn be understood to come out of different patterns of interdependence, as befits Elias's emphasis on figurations, although again his framework would not be accepted uncritically by feminist researchers. Jocelyn Cornwell has argued that there are 'radical differences in the way people experience community and in what they know about it'. If she is correct that women occupy 'a much wider range of communal spaces' than men do, this could explain their 'much wider variety of contacts' (1984, pp.49, 50), and through them more frequent reinforcement of Elias's 'we-identity', but her analysis gives women more capacity to shape their social world than Elias did. Likewise, Charles and her colleagues highlighted the centrality of women's networks in their re-study of Swansea, but in doing so emphasised 'women's agency' (2008, p.203) in explaining both change and continuity. Their research design facilitated contrasts between working-class and middle-class neighbourhoods, but these did not confirm Eliasian thinking about the civilization process that innovation trickles down through the class structure. The 'principle of stratified diffusion' (Young & Willmott 1975, p.19) notwithstanding, in community relationships research findings point as much to 'bottom-up' patterns of innovation as they do to 'top-down' ones, driven by practical concerns rather than the pursuit of unrealisable cultural ideals.

It remains as important as ever to ask how change comes about, and 'process sociology' (Elias 1987a, p.xxxix) inevitably poses that question, offering a 'remarkable... attempt to contain the social and the individual within a unified scheme of sociological analysis' (Abrams 1982, pp.230-1). Elias's writings are not encouraging to people seeking rapid transformation. His research into *The Court Society*, for example, portrays a world in which 'No single person within the figuration was able to initiate a reform of the tradition... So everything remained as it was' (1983, p.87). Elsewhere he refers to the 'drag effect' (1991, p.211) exercised by the past. The Winston Parva study also pointed to the enduring nature of social arrangements even though change might have appeared overdue, and the message that 'human bonds... cannot be made and unmade at will' (1974, p.xviii) would be discouraging for researchers whose philosophy includes a commitment to enacting change. Participatory action research and related approaches have grown in popularity since Elias's time. His insistence on the need to keep academic research and politics separate has no appeal to researchers in these traditions; they explicitly reject his view of the need to curb 'the personal feelings and ideals of the researcher' (1983, p.28). Even here, however, there would be value in dialogue, not least because Elias's perspective raises important (albeit awkward) questions about taking sides, notably those relating to findings that are uncomfortable for members of communities being researched. Elias and Scotson's portrayal of the 'established' population of Winston Parva was an indictment of their we-image, and Elias's use of the term 'dream' to describe some community members' aspirations was a less than complimentary assessment of their grasp on reality.

### Conclusion

Elias's argument that 'sociological theories which are not borne out by empirical work are useless' (1983, p.22) stands as a challenge to philosophically-oriented theorising about community, for example Bauman (2001). It also points to inevitable updating of how community phenomena are understood as new data become available. His theorisation of the relationship between community insiders and outsiders owed much to the fieldwork findings from Winston Parva. Things have necessarily moved on. In an era when geographical mobility has increased exponentially, it can be asked whether communities may become stronger where newcomers are given more opportunities to integrate than they were in Elias and Scotson's famous study (Somerville 2011, pp.18-19). In the context of 'super-diversity', the arrival in neighbourhoods of mobile populations forces reconsideration of how community is best understood. If Talja Blokland is correct that 'Under rapid transformations, the notion of establishment is destabilized' (2017, p.84), it follows that new conceptualization will be needed. Theories of social capital suggest shifts in the balance of power between established and newly-arrived populations, especially where the latter comprise middle-class groups (Butler with Robson 2003; Savage, Bagnall & Longhurst 2005; Benson 2011). Meanwhile, social network analysis has led Manuel Castells to argue that local communities may be revitalised by 'defensive reactions' (1997, p.64) against globalization. Whether such processes are inward-looking is a matter of ongoing research (Day 2006, ch.7). A dialogue between these

ideas and Elias's extended theory of community's elaborated analysis of 'we' identities has exciting potential.

Furthermore, the potential for creative engagement by feminist researchers with Elias's ideas can be noted. Feminist responses to Elias's work might be expected to have been greater (van Krieken 1998, pp.170-1), and there is scope to follow up the appreciation of the importance of women's centrality to informal sociability that previously was neglected through the concentration on formal community organizations. Such engagement will not leave Elias's concepts unchallenged; his theorisation of 'gossip', for example, needs revision in the light of the research findings of oral historians and others. Further ideas of his also stand in need of clarification and critical assessment in the field; how to operationalise the notion of the we-I balance remains to be worked out in detail, as do the processes by which community members might develop the self-detachment to see through misleadingly-idealised conceptions of community and to adopt more robust sociological ones. The goal that Elias identified of securing 'the continuous progress from one generation to the next' (1983, p.34) of knowledge and understanding in a field of research endeavour may still be some way off in the sociology of community, but his extended theory of community has the potential to contribute to things moving resolutely in the direction of new discoveries building on past ones.

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