

## [Norbert Elias and Figurations which Appear in Immigration] Social Problems that *Move*

*Abstract:* Norbert Elias' dynamic conceptual understanding provides an approach to capturing some of the 'new' social problems which appear with globalization. Elias examines the correlations that arise in immigration – the social problems that 'move'. The hypothesis is that Norbert Elias' dynamic sociology, including the concept of figurations, can be used to analyze social problems that arise and change across different contexts. Elias provides correlations that cross micro/macro and social/psychological perspectives useful in interpreting social issues "in movement", both in time and space.

*Keywords:* Figuration, Immigration, Social problems, Foreigner, Globalization.

In this article I argue that some types of social problems call for a different look to be discovered - social problems that *move*. I argue for using the dynamic sociology of Norbert Elias, including the concept of figurations, for empirical analysis that can be used to analyze social problems that arise and change across different contexts. Based on my thesis (Kirk, 2011), where I have studied the process of Unaccompanied Afghan refugee children during their journey using the perspective on social figurations, I argue that Norbert Elias' dynamic understanding gives an approach to capture some of the 'new' social problems which appear with globalization. Norbert Elias gives an approach on how to capture the correlations that arise in immigration – the social problems that *move*.

I argue that Norbert provides a perspective for correlations that crosses micro/macro and the social/psychological but he also gives a perspective that preserves social problems crossing time and space and therefore an approach to social problems that *move*. Elias' understanding of the relationship between individual and society as a dynamic interaction of changing balances of power that creates new social connections is of great importance for the discovery of social problems and also how the social problems are analyzed.

Norbert Elias' dynamic starting point for analyzing *social life* not through conflict but through its relationships provides an understanding of social problems that are to be understood in the complex historical processes (Elias 1939). Elias' understanding of how historical processes that structure our acting and thinking, and the transformations processes, which occur with globalization, gives an approach on how to capture problems crossing time and space. This is to be captured in figurations appearing for unaccompanied Afghan refugee children on their journey in and through different contexts. Norbert Elias's understanding of «the closer connections of chains of independence, which spread over space – and are integrated into functional or institutional units – the greater social threat» (Elias 1939: 384) gives an approach on how to capture how refugees are described and discussed and its impact for how unaccompanied Afghan refugee children are handled in the countries they move in – social problems moving in the long transformed chains. How a social problem as the situation in Afghanistan may appear across time and space.

Elias' dynamic approach also provides a perspective on how to locate new figurations which appear on different

levels and the connection between them (Loyal & Quilley 2004:387). His dynamic micro/macro approach gives the opportunity to analyze new social correlations. Thus he provides a perspective for analyzing figurations at different levels, both in relation to the figurations that characterize children's everyday lives and the social figurations which children are affected by and the relationship between them. Elias' approach to macro/micro gives an opportunity to discover 'new' contexts that appear in the changing social processes in the relationship between individual and society - between micro/macro.

The author also gives an approach to locate social problems in the relationship between social processes and the processes that characterize the psychological development – the transformation of personality structures. He quotes that one must «begin with the structure of interpersonal relationships to understand individual's psyche» (Elias 1994a: 66): so providing a perspective to the psychological development and character, not a symptom but a strategy developed in social processes (Elias 1982). By that Elias gives an approach on how to analyze how social problems occur in the *social* between social processes and human adjustment of behavior.

Norbert Elias' dynamics give a perspective for correlations that crosses social/psychological micro/macro but also his dynamic perspective to preserve social problems crossing time and space and therefore he provides an approach on how to capture some of the 'new' problems appearing in immigration. Elias provides approach on how to capture global conflicts expressed and shifted to individual lives and destinies; new social problems that appear in the analysis of the process of unaccompanied Afghan minors.

### *A field study*

The basis for this paper is an analysis from a field study; a research of unaccompanied Afghan children's everyday life, including their acts and interpretations and how these are created according to their positions (Kirk 2011). The empirical data are collected in expert interviews, child interviews, children's stories, children's drawings and from observing the children's everyday life, where everyday life is taking place in the refugee day-centers, parks and train-stations (Jacobsen, Kristiansen 2001). Empirical data are collected in Istanbul, Mytilini, Athens and Rome. This is their most common route – and spaces during their journey. The empirical analysis has been looking at correlations or figurations which appear in the everyday life of the children during their journey, spaces and their strategies coping with these everyday-figurations. The concept of figuration provides a perspective in which unaccompanied Afghan refugee children have been analyzed in relation to their network or 'the social' during their journey. It is from these relationships that figurations occur; correlations that shape the children's lives. Figurations appear by the control and regulation both in the social contexts in which the children live their everyday lives and in the communities in which the children reside. By given examples of figurations which occur in the children's everyday life I argue that new correlations appear in immigration.

### *Figurations which appear for unaccompanied Afghan refugee children in immigration*

Despite a large geographical journey, unaccompanied Afghan refugee children are continuously forced to be in a position of 'travelers' and to be retained and trapped: «Go Patra for one euro and then sleep in Patra and then... What to do?» – 15-years old Afghan boy in Athens (Kirk 2011:53). The children are forced to stay in a city or region in shorter or longer periods; an ongoing conflict between 'the need to move' and 'waiting'. Unaccompanied Afghan refugee children's strategy is to remain silent and be hesitant. Refugee children are afraid of the authorities and the police, which means that they flee away from safety: «...when we see the police we go fast. So the police can't find us» – 15 years old Afghan boy in Athens (Kirk 2011:57). The idea of the 'necessary escape from safety' is maintained through the children's informal networks and relationships that are the elderly and other Afghan children. This figuration both captures them in a position of both no security and the possibility of obtaining security knowledge on the journey. Instead, the journey becomes an isolated journey. Another figuration which appears is that unaccompanied Afghan refugee children function as cheap labor in their spaces during the journey but still they are without money and are situated at the bottom of the work hierarchy: «Here I can't work. Life is very difficult here. I can't work and I don't have money – it is very difficult. It is difficult to buy food and clothes and other things for life» – 17-years old Afghan boy in Athens (Kirk 2011:54) The children prefer to get money by

selling services, or in some cases, commit crime, rather than interrupting the illegal journey. The survival strategy is to find themselves among those who 'have less'. A strategy by which they lock themselves in the toughest and worst paid jobs, and remain homeless. Another figuration which appears is that unaccompanied Afghan refugee children's everyday lives are influenced by both boredom and stress: «They can't be weak or be lacy or say 'no', I don't know what to do – then they would be lost - so they are sensitive all the time» – social worker at Greek Council for Refugees (Kirk 2011:56). Refugee children are locked in a situation where they must take responsibility for their own lives, but at the same time have no control over their own destiny. A strategy is to be hesitant and passive players in the everyday routines, while they are simultaneously stressed and actively attempt to seize the opportunities to continue their journey. Unaccompanied Afghan refugee children are forced to seek help among 'older boys' and friends, as confidence in the authorities and the police is non-existent: «I don't see one help from the government of Greece – only my friends help me» – 15 years old Afghan boy in Athens (Kirk 2011:58). These illegal networks are utility-oriented networks which make them not search for other networks, because of the social dependencies in these close relationships: «They walk around in these spots – the way that they have learned in the city – where the others go, and they don't go out to explore – no! » (volunteer at Joel Nafume Refugee Center in Rome, in Kirk 2011: 59). Unaccompanied Afghan refugee children only seek help when it is really needed – otherwise they isolate themselves. They are restrained on an invisible journey before arriving to Europe. They work for smugglers, are separated and out of contact with society. At the same time they are living 'under' entrenched social issues. Refugee children's strategy is to subservience from the work requirements – the development of a subservience behavior. They are a part of a larger refugee group and by that comes also their unruly behavior, which contributes to a situation where people do not feel responsibility for the children. Afghans are looked upon as terrorists. Unaccompanied Afghan refugee children are physically visible, but personally invisible and anonymous. They remain in anonymity and have no space to step out of anonymity. Unaccompanied Afghan refugee children find themselves alone on a physical journey with *no name* and with *no identity*. The strategy is to maintain a factual and emotional distance in their networks. Unaccompanied Afghan refugee children have no opportunities to create intimate relationships. They do not possess the capacity to help each other: a position where children experience guilt and emotional stress to a degree where they have difficulty sleeping at night. The children's strategy is to try to forget and repress emotions, while they are on the journey (Kirk 2011: 60-62). Unaccompanied Afghan refugee children are constantly crossing dreams and the desire for a meaningful life. Because of constant discouragements, they develop skills to maintain the vision of the destination and dreams and to make sense of the senseless suffering: «I hope to reach to some place and that I will find my family» – 16-year old Afghan boy in Athens (Kirk 2011:66). Here they constantly find themselves between despair and hope.

#### *Children's life space: the overall constellation of figurations*

Unaccompanied Afghan refugee children's space is limited in relation to both material, social and cultural space. In the material space, they are in a position as the lowest member in the hierarchy on the journey which isolates them and hides them for the surrounding community – in the different contexts where they move. Unaccompanied Afghan refugee children's social space is dominated by unofficial utility-oriented network in which there are no associated relational ties to any players, but instead they keep their distance. They develop skills where they do not attract attention and therefore regulate their behavior by 'keeping up with the others'. The children learn how to survive under the conditions they are facing during their journey and they develop skills to make it through childhood. The different contexts in which the refugee children move conduct regulations and constitute difficulties to adapt to playing children who can be understood as a personal structure developed in immigration. Unaccompanied Afghan refugee children isolate themselves and develop survival skills in order to act appropriately in the calculative and fragile contexts in which they find themselves both with fellow friends, older boys, traffickers and the authorities. The cultural space in which the children navigate is characterized by non-existent knowledge of European rules, rights, languages and social structures. The children are traveling through Europe in the 'out' area, where the status as a *cultural stranger* with 'no place' seems to lock children in a position as not wanted and with no name. Conceptual understanding of the refugee children's space is a constellation of

figurations in which they are retained in material, social and cultural conditions where they are without even basic services and where they are anonymous – they are *lost in space*; retained by the outsider-established uneven balance of power that appears in the spaces they move in (Elias 1994b).

*Correlations crossing social processes and psychological development*

Elias' sociology has provided a perspective on how to analyze social problems that arise across micro/macro and social/psychological factors and the consolidations that cross time and space and by that spurring new social problems. Elias' dynamic approach examines the psychological factors creating the children *in the social* and *capturing this process*. The independence correlations influence the children throughout their childhood – they move along in different contexts. Refugee children develop personality structures by adjusting to the many efforts they make to survive in a given situation. A constant control of the signals and impressions are taking place throughout their journey. This is a strategy they use to adjust to the utility-oriented network. In social contexts with the older boys and smugglers, they develop an adjusting behavior. This regulation of the social behavior creates a psychological structure where some of the children find it difficult to verbalize thoughts and feelings. Submissive development of 'low thought about themselves' is a result of the social conditions they are in and make them adjust their expectations.

*Correlations crossing societal structures and individual behavior*

Norbert Elias look for the relationship between the individual and society between the micro/macro and the processes are to be found in the process of the non-existent and anonymous structures in which the children stay, - and the structures created by the children's invisibility and anonymous behavior. These figurations appear as a dialectical process between the structures in which the children find themselves - or in the lack of structures - and the behavioral adjustments that take place (Elias 1982). With their own behavior, the children are co-creators of the overall constellation of figurations in which the children are.

*Correlations crossing historical processes and the children's position*

In the overall constellation of figuration, the chains that cross time and space appear. There is a dialectical relationship between social development and other behavior requirements (Krieken 2002). The children's position in social contexts is the lowest in the hierarchy. The social value and moral status of the children are correlated (Mennell, Goudsblom 1997). This perspective also captures how the stranger perceptions are seen in a lack of legislation/opportunities or lack of the maintenance of the laws of the countries they move in. The fact that within in different countries there is no moral obligation to change the situation for the children is found in the children's position and vice versa. In the dynamic approach of Norbert Elias, the stranger perception is a historical process – which has been transformed over time and now crosses space. This appears in the changes of the understanding of immigration where refugees are to be understood as very different from the West – *as outsiders*. Among others, the sociologist Stephen Castles argues that the perception of immigrants has changed from being a resource to a European burden. I argue that this historical process changes the social context in which the refugee children are. Social distances which appear in the spaces are here created by us/them – what Elias understands as an uneven balance of power between the established and the outsiders (Elias 2002:45). Castles (2008: 34) quotes: «Cold War refugees mainly white and middle class were seen as easy to integrate. Today refugees' flows are the result of a new-global order». The social distance between the children and the communities is maintained through a perception of children as being a threat to the established norms, values, lifestyles and codes. This is an oppressed position that prolongs their journey.

*Stranger perceptions: outsiders/established*

Unaccompanied Afghan refugee children are looked at in disgust in the new and unknown spaces they are moving in. From Norbert Elias' perspective, this is a moral value that is created through the historical processes that

have occurred over time: «Yes, so one of the main problems is that people are afraid of them and look at them with fear – or the fact that they are so ‘different’ – volunteer at Joel Nafume Refugee Centre/Rome (Kirk 2011:62). Unaccompanied Afghan refugee children are as strangers, *outsiders* in the uneven balance of power between society and themselves (Elias 1982). This macro figuration of stranger-perceptions appears in the communities in which refugee children are moving and is affecting the children’s individual space and their opportunities: in other words the overall constellation of figurations. Unaccompanied Afghan refugee children are the lowest in the hierarchy both in the utility-oriented networks and in the surrounding community, a situation that locks the children in a position as oppressed. This is a relationship established in the unconscious and automatic control mechanisms to legalize the situation of the refugee children. It is shown by the lack of legislation/opportunities or lack of maintenance of the laws of the countries they move in; migrant perceptions which are developing the political strategies – different political strategies in a European context. Elias’ dynamic understanding of uneven balances of power between the established and the outsiders can provide an approach to understanding how these different political strategies are affecting individuals and are causing new types of social problems within a European context.

*Norbert Elias and social problems which move*

I argue that some types of social problems call for a different approach – social problems that move. The relevance of Elias’ dynamic sociology approach provides a concept to discover some of the ‘new’ and long interdependency chains, which appear with globalization. The author provides a dynamic approach to capturing the correlations that arise in immigration. Refugee children develop a certain behavior in the beginning of their journey when they are oriented towards utility-oriented network. A behavior and strategy developed and used throughout the journey. Personality structures developed during their journey co-create the figurations and thereby the social problems which are moving along in different contexts.

The social distances and tensions that arise in these figurations can be comprehended in conflicts between ethnic groups in Afghanistan and the social distances that appear across time and space. A self-regulated behavior from Afghanistan is a figuration that moves along. This appears in the recreated conflict between the Harare and the Pashtun or the pedophilia among boys in the contexts they are moving:

The most Afghans people here are from Hazara and not Pashtun as in Afghanistan, and they recreate the same differences, so even when they were in this refugee camp there was a fight with the Hazara. There was a war dividing them (Lorena Di Lorenzo, sociologist at Fondazione L’Albero della Vita, Rome, in Kirk 2011: 35)

Elias captures the configurations that arise from the varied ways of dealing with refugee children during their journey. The global contexts such as the war in Afghanistan are creating a historical process of a change of perception of strangers, immigration, the criminalization, and fear for the children that follow the children to Europe. In the use of Norbert Elias and the concept of figuration of social problems crossing time and space – both social contexts, figurations of everyday life in Afghanistan, the web of relationships, and the overall constellation of configurations created on the journey and then move along. There is a need for a different approach in order to understand the contexts across national/European/global divisions. As, the Afghan unaccompanied children move, a social problem emerges where the children fall between every conceivable space. In order to capture these new social problems that arises in immigration, Norbert Elias’ dynamic figurational sociology approach is highly relevant and holds a perspective for the future.

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