

From the Laws of Civilisation to Deviance and Crime: Norbert Elias and the Tightening Grip of Social Control - A Structural Analysis

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Abstract:

The interpretation of criminal behaviour is a complex and ongoing discussion in the field of criminology. The theoretical framework of structural analysis is of great value due to its strengths and limitations in understanding and explaining human behaviour in general and criminal behaviour in particular. By focusing on the social context, Norbert Elias's theory of structural construction emphasises the role of social structures such as class, gender and race in shaping criminal behaviour. This shifts the focus beyond individual characteristics and recognises the influence of wider social inequalities, helping to explain patterns of criminal behaviour and variations in crime rates across different social groups and communities. It can help to understand the relationship between factors such as poverty and unemployment and higher crime rates. In addition, this theory addresses the underlying social conditions that create inequalities and opportunities for crime, which is useful for efforts to address root causes rather than focusing solely on punishment.

Keywords: Structural theory, crime, class, race, human behaviour.

1- Introduction:

Crime cannot be seen simply as random acts in a world characterised by different religions, customs, traditions and habits. Rather, it is like a grand ballet choreographed by society itself. This provocative proposition is put forward by Norbert Elias in his theory of structural construction. The tension arises when we delve into this fascinating and sometimes disturbing world where social structures such as class, race and gender become the driving forces behind individuals, like puppets pulling the strings of criminal behaviour.

Through the lens of structural analysis, Norbert Elias reveals a remarkable paradox. As Western societies evolved from fragmented entities into intricately woven tapestries, so too did the demands placed on individual behaviour. As occupational specialisation flourished and social circles widened, the number of influential actors affecting each individual action increased. According to Elias, this necessitated a tightening of social control.

Imagine a bustling marketplace filled with interconnected activities. Each vendor and shopper, their actions intricately linked, delicate harmonies of etiquette and expectation. To navigate this maze, Elias argues, individuals internalise a complex set of "civilised symbols". These symbols, learned from infancy to adulthood, become automatic mechanisms, a self-imposed force that shapes and constrains behaviour. Deviance within this framework becomes a flaw in these intricate harmonies, a discordant note in the social symphony.

Elias's formulation of theory through the lens of crime is intriguing and raises interesting questions that can be presented as follows:

How do 'civilised rules' differ between social groups and affect criminal behaviour?

Does the increasing complexity of social structures lead to a greater likelihood and aggravation of criminal activity?

Can Elias's theory help us understand the psychological motivations behind criminal activity, or is it primarily concerned with external pressures and controls?

By exploring these questions, we can unleash the potential of "Elias" to shed light on the complex relationship between social structures, individual behaviour and the act of crime itself. Let's define some terms.

2- Conceptual definitions:

Structuralism: The term 'structure' is derived from the Latin verb 'struere', meaning the arrangement or manner in which something exists. The concept of structure refers to the composition or way in which a building or entity is constructed. It implies the organisation or the way in which a particular structure is built. (Mahyub, 1993: 16)

Structure has been described as a "system of rationality" and it has been said that it is an independent symbolic system, separate from the system of reality and the

system of imagination, but deeper than both. It is the symbolic system. Historically, we find that the word "structure" came from a similar word, the word "form". (Qattous, 2006: 124)

Concept: It is "a system of fixed internal relations that determines the essential characteristics of any entity and constitutes a complete and inseparable system that cannot be reduced to a mere sum of its elements, or a system that governs the elements in terms of their existence and the laws of their development". (Al-Munasarah, 2006: 542)

This concept has contained more than one perspective, as Jean Piaget acknowledged when he said: "Giving a unified definition of structure is subject to distinguishing between the idea of positive idealism, which gives the concept of structure in conflicts and in different horizons of types of structures and critical intentions that accompanied the emergence and development of each of them in contrast to the existing currents in various teachings". However, he defines it as: "A set of transformations containing laws as a set that remains or takes care of the play of the transformations themselves, without overstepping their limits or resorting to external elements". (Piaget, 1989: 7-8)

The term "structuralism", from which "structurality" is derived, is a common tendency in several sciences, such as psychology and genetics, to determine a human phenomenon in relation to a structured whole. It is a theory based on the identification of the functions of internal elements in the structure of language, showing that these specified functions are part of clear systems, and that the members have no independent existence except through the determination of their general functions. (Sabour, 1984: 52)

It is clear that the concepts of structure and genesis (formation) are the basis of structuralism. (Lahmadani, 1990: 68)

Structure adheres to Goldman's concept which is "human action understood as an expression of a human situation. It arises from the action of the individual who gives his action a social dimension and a comprehensive meaning that reflects the spiritual vision of his community. The notion of genesis or generation here does not include a temporal aspect that traces the thing studied back to its history and origin. The temporal aspect is very secondary in this matter. Goldman makes no secret of his discomfort with the word 'structure', fearing the stability and stagnation that it can imply. He says: "Unfortunately, the word 'structure' has a connotation of stillness, and so it is quite wrong, and

we should not talk about structures, because they rarely exist in social life, except rarely and for a short time. Rather, we are talking about the processes that form structures". (Shahid, 1982: 77)

The quality of being generative here is "the inferential formula of the act, following its formation process within the work and reconstructing its structure based on the social meaning it tends to." (Bahri, 2015: 142)

From this perspective, the structure that Goldman adopts is related to human action and behaviour. Understanding structure is an attempt to provide a meaningful response to a specific human situation, as it establishes a balance between the actor and his action, or between people and things. The quality of being generative here refers to meaning without necessarily referring to origin. Abdul Salam Al-Masdi, in his book "The Problem of Structuralism", points out that from Goldman's point of view, this term aims at establishing a balance between the external world (which surrounds man and sends him, for example, wars, conquests, displacements and disturbances) and the internal world (which emanates from man and the human group for the purpose of interaction or rejection). Goldman sees this balance as changing from one community to another and from one period to another. (Al-Masdi, 1995: 208)

Structure is therefore a self-regulating entity based on its own internal laws and relationships. It can include others. Structure is revealed through the internal analysis of everything, its elements, the relationships between them, their positions and the system it adopts. André Lalande adds: "Structure is each component of coherent phenomena, each of which depends on the others and can only exist thanks to its relationship with what is beyond it". (Ibrahim, 1990: 31)

3- Constitutive structuralism.

Throughout Western history, from early times to the present, as social functions have become more differentiated, the number of roles has increased. As a result, the number of individuals on whom the individual continuously relies for all of his or her actions, from the simplest and most common to the most complex and least common, also increases.

With the increasing number of individuals who must coordinate their behaviour with the behaviour of others in interactive processes, the network of actions must be organised with greater rigour and precision if each individual action is

to fulfil its social function. According to Elias, individuals are forced to organise their behaviour in an increasingly differentiated and controlled way. The behaviour of the individual becomes more complex and more stable from his early years, either as an automatic mechanism or as a compulsion of the self, which means that one cannot resist even if one consciously wishes to do so. (Elias, 1939/1978: 232-233)

4- Configurational structuralism from the perspective of Norbert Elias:

Norbert Elias' perspective goes beyond mere historical intrigue. He saw it as a microcosm, a crucible in which the 'process of civilisation' unfolded in stark relief. Within this elite realm, carefully crafted models of behaviour were formulated, dictating norms of conduct and boundaries of acceptable behaviour. These models then spread throughout society, skilfully shaping norms and expectations. (Elias, 1939/1978: 258)

However, this carefully coordinated world of "pushes" and "looks" also had its own dark underbelly. Elias reminds us that even the monarch, who seemed to enjoy absolute power, operated within an 'iron cage' of social control. The complex web of expectations, constant scrutiny by peers and unspoken rules of behaviour acted as invisible shackles from which even the most powerful could not escape. (Ibid: 226)

This perspective provides a fascinating lens through which to understand deviant behaviour. If even the distinguished elite were subject to such strict social control, what about those living on the margins? Inevitably, the loosening of these 'pressures' and the breaking of these behavioural models contribute to the emergence of criminal activity.

By delving into the intricate dance of social control within the courtly realm, Elias's theory offers valuable insights into the motivations and underlying mechanisms of criminal behaviour at different levels of society. It invites us to question the illusion of freedom, even for those who appear powerful, and to examine the nuanced ways in which social structures both constrain and facilitate deviant acts.

5- Elias and the dynamics of power in deviance.

Beneath the religious façade of court life, Norbert Elias observes a slight shift in the balance of power. He argues that even under the absolute rule of the king and the nobility, whispers of a new system of movement have begun to emerge.

This new system, characterised by the gradual monopolisation of arms and taxes by the state, represents a decisive turning point in the history of crime. (Elias, 1939/1978: 236)

Elias suggests that the monopolisation of power by the state becomes fertile ground for a new type of deviance. By controlling these key resources, the state gains unprecedented influence over individuals, their emotions and their ability to act. This control, however, generates discontent and a desire for independence, creating fertile ground for the emergence of rebel movements and criminal networks.

Elias's focus on the "inhomogeneity of social functions" becomes particularly relevant here. In this increasingly complex web, individuals are no longer just individuals, but agents navigating a network of power dynamics. The marginalised, excluded from the state monopoly, may turn to alternative power structures, forming criminal networks that operate outside the boundaries of official control. (Ibid: 234)

6- From emotions to protocols: Elias and the Civilisation of Criminal Intent.

Beneath the gilded veneer of court life, Norbert Elias reveals a subtle but significant transformation: the gradual shift from a society governed by individual emotions to one governed by regulated protocols and rational control. This process of civilisation, Elias argues, was not simply imposed from above by the king and the nobility, but was driven by a collective desire for stability and order.

Inadvertently, the king's monopoly of arms and taxes sparked an advanced social consciousness among the common people. They became aware of the potential for abuse and imbalance as they yearned for a more organised system where emotions were tempered by reason and individual actions were guided by established protocols. Since the king symbolised absolute authority, Elias suggests that this collective struggle paved the way for the emergence of the state, not as a tyrannical entity, but as a mechanism for collective self-regulation.

Through this lens, criminal behaviour takes on a new dimension.

It becomes not just a violation of individual rights or societal norms, but a rejection of the very project of civilisation.

Whether driven by personal gain or ideological rebellion, criminals represent a disruption within the carefully designed protocols and logical control. (Elias, 1939/1978: 236)

For Elias, the increasing differentiation of social functions plays a fundamental role in the process of civilisation. Linked to this differentiation is what Elias calls a "complete reorganisation of the social fabric" (ibid: 234).

Here Elias describes the historical process that witnessed the gradual emergence of stable key players in society who monopolised the means of financial power and taxation.

Furthermore, Elias consistently resisted the claim to be a 'social theorist', as he wanted to avoid the tendency towards factionalism, theorists and theoretical perspectives at the expense of ongoing social research. He preferred simply to develop his conceptual framework in the course of his research, achieving both theoretical coherence and ambition. As he put it, his task was to build on the work of Marx, Weber and Freud and, in collaboration with a comprehensive theory of human society, to provide an integrative reference framework for various specialised social sciences. (Elias, 1994b: 131)

"Elias" was ready to present his social portrait when logical theory was for some time organised around the concept of "visualisation". He developed a dislike for the term "virtual sociology" and eventually came to prefer the term "practical sociology". It was also recognised that Elias developed a different way of perceiving the social world. He believed that "many problems and obstacles in contemporary social science are constructed within the same categories and concepts that are organised around society and human behaviour" (Elias, 1969: 127).

His work is an argument for a specific social vocabulary and conceptual framework that incorporates a form of social perception. He believed that this framework would approach the reality of human social life by defining important concepts such as formation, habitat, civilisation, relationship, network and power relations, interdependence, establishment, stranger, participation and separation. It also served as a radical alternative to the standard concepts used by most sociologists in the second half of the twentieth century, such as society, system, structure, role, action, interaction, individual and reproduction. "Elias shared with most sociologists an explanation of the organisation of social life, and he saw sociology as primarily concerned with the "problem of order", but

from a very specific perspective. He did not see "social order" as a problem, stating: "The term is understood in the same sense as one speaks of a natural system in which decay and destruction are organised processes along with growth, integration, death and dissolution, along with birth and assimilation" (Elias, 1978: 76).

7- Elias and the unintended roots of criminal behaviour.

Norbert Elias's curiosity extended beyond the surface level of individual behaviour. He was fascinated by a more fundamental puzzle: how does the complex fabric of social order emerge, seemingly independent of conscious human design? He saw this as the separating force of 'transient figurations' from the enduring structures that govern our social lives, including patterns of crime itself.

Imagine a bustling city, a complex ecological system teeming with millions of individual choices. Yet amidst this apparent chaos, there is a certain order, a set of unspoken rules that guide movement, interaction and even deviance. For Elias, this was the unintended magic of the self-regulation of social forces that shape behaviour, including criminal behaviour, without the intervention of behavioural coordination.

This perspective challenges our tendency to see crime as a deliberate act or the product of individual malice or pathology. Instead, Elias invites us to consider the broader social context, the invisible currents and pressures that shape the choices available to individuals.

Poverty, inequality, social exclusion - all unintended consequences of human interaction - can become fertile ground for criminal activity, even by those who may not have clear criminal intentions.

Elias focused his attention on a fundamentally different issue: the apparent independence of the social order from deliberate human action. For Elias, the question was: "How is it at all possible that in the human world those formations can arise which no human being has intended and which are still nothing more than unstable, structureless cloud formations?(Elias, 1994a: 4-443)

Among the thinkers who initially contributed to the development of an understanding of this question were Adam Smith, Hegel, Malthus, Marx and Comte. Hegel's concept of the 'cunning of reason' was one of the earliest attempts to capture the 'organised independence' of social life from the

individuals who make it up. People are constantly confronted with the results of their actions, much as a sorcerer's apprentice is confronted with the spirits he has conjured up but can no longer control. They gaze in awe at the twists and turns of the historical flow, which they themselves shape but do not command. (Elias, 1991: 62)

In the broad sweep of history, Elias observed the extent to which individuals are subject to forces beyond their control. A person acting within the flow may have a better chance of understanding the extent to which he is dependent on individuals in individual situations (ibid: 48).

It is also unrealistic to believe that people are interchangeable. According to Elias, the individual is nothing more than a negative vehicle for a social machine (ibid: 54).

Elias saw social life as 'constraining' and 'flexible', revealing crossroads where people have to make choices depending on their social position. These choices may affect their immediate personal destiny, the destiny of their entire family or, in certain circumstances, the destiny of entire nations or groups (ibid: 49).

Thus, agency is formed through the strategic use of opportunities that arise for individuals and groups, but not through the actual creation of those opportunities, which is determined by the specific structure of the person's society and the nature of the roles that people play within it.

Moreover, once an opportunity is seized, human action becomes intertwined with the actions of others, setting in motion further chains of events based not on individual or collective actors, but on distribution, power and the structure of tensions within this mobile human network (Elias, 1991: 50).

The limited capacity of individuals within their social context suggests that deviance and crime can be seen as arising from the interplay between individual choices and the constraints and opportunities provided by the social structure.

The focus on 'the distribution of tensions, their strength and their structure' within the social network is essential for understanding how forms of inequality and power imbalances contribute to the emergence of certain types of deviance and crime. For example, marginalised communities may have fewer legitimate opportunities and turn to criminal activities because of their social position.

The idea of 'chains of action' emphasises the interconnectedness of human behaviour. The deviance of individuals can have unintended consequences and ripple effects throughout the social network, potentially leading to further deviance and crime.

Indeed, Elias often emphasised the unplanned nature of social life, challenging the notion that there is a direct link between human action and its outcomes. However, all his observations converge on a more nuanced understanding because he consistently believed that improving human control over social life was the ultimate goal of social analysis. Human beings can only hope to master and understand these functional relationships, which have no inherent meaning, if they recognise them as distinct and relatively independent functional relationships and study them systematically. The process, which begins at birth and continues throughout a person's life, is strengthened and reinforced by their changing relationships with others throughout their lives (Elias, 1978a: 58).

Elias saw an understanding of long-term, unplanned change as serving both a "better orientation" to social processes that go beyond human planning and a better understanding of social domains that are aligned with human intentions and goals.

With regard to technological change, he remarked: "From the point of view of scientific theory, what is interesting is the interweaving of unplanned processes with human planning" (Elias, 1997: 370; 1994: 26).

In this perspective, Elias implies that deviance and crime can be seen as emergent properties of these unplanned processes and functional linkages, involving not only individual choices but the interaction of individual actions within larger social structures.

Understanding these linkages can help identify social domains where unplanned processes create conditions conducive to deviance. This, in turn, can inform targeted interventions and social policies to mitigate these risks.

Interestingly, Elias's conceptualisations can be applied within this framework to understand technological change and shed light on the interplay between unplanned processes and human planning. This may be relevant to understanding how unintended consequences of technological progress can lead to new forms of deviance and crime, requiring adaptation and innovation in social control mechanisms.

8- The structure and dynamics of social life

According to Elias, understanding the structure and dynamics of social life requires conceptualising human beings as interconnected rather than as independent individuals. He emphasised the notion of 'interdependence' rather than social systems or structures characterised by specific social and historical forms of habitus or personality structure. It means seeing people in the plural as part of groups and networks, since their individual identities exist only within and through these networks or forms.

Elias argued that the process of civilisation itself has created a capsule or barrier around individual experience, separating the inner world from the outer world. He emphasised the interconnectedness of human beings, the fact that one can only become an individual human being within a network of social relationships and within a network of interdependencies with one's family, school, church, community, ethnic group, class, gender and work organisation. Thus, "the fundamental bond of man begins at birth as a helpless child over whom we have no control... and behind all the intended interactions of men lies their unintended interdependence" (Elias, 1969: 143).

This is further emphasised when Elias states that 'the process, which begins at birth and continues throughout a person's life, is reinforced and constantly influenced by their changing relationships with others' (Elias, 1994: 555). (Elias, 1994: 455).

Elias developed this point in part through his critique of what he called the 'clucosos' or the 'closed individual image of man'.

He argued that this concept, with its emphasis on independence, freedom and autonomous agency, should be replaced by an image of the individual as open, with varying degrees of relative independence from others.

Such interdependencies are the link between what is here called 'formation', a structure of interrelated and interdependent individuals. (Ibid: 14-213).

Elias introduced the concept of 'figuration' in the 1960s as a way of placing the problem of human interconnectedness at the heart of logical social theory. (Elias, 1978a: 134).

He also hoped to overcome the inherent contradiction in using the terms 'individual' and 'society'. (Elias, 1994: 214).

Elias saw societies as fundamentally shaped by processes and structures of interdependence, formed by the actions of many individuals (Elias, 1978a: 103). He also believed that overcoming the tendency to deny human agency and individuality could be facilitated by using concepts such as 'society' or 'social systems'. Seeing people as "forming figurations with others" sharpens and deepens our understanding of individuality (Elias, 1983: 213).

Elias used the metaphor of a dance to illustrate the concept, stating that "the moving image of interdependent individuals on the dance floor can make it easy to imagine states, cities, families, capitalist systems, communist systems, feudal systems as figurations" (Elias, 1994a: 214).

This refers to the discovery of Eastern European systems in 1989 and their reliance on the dynamics of personalities within them and the formation of a shared social habitus or collective personality as the collective basis of individual human behaviour. In Elias's words: "This composition of the social habitus of individuals is formed as the soil from which sprout the personal characteristics in which the individual differs from other members of his society. And in this way, something of the common language that the individual shares with others emerges, which is certainly one of the components of his social habitus, which can undoubtedly be called an individual signature that derives from the social scenario" (Elias, 1991: 182).

At another stage, Elias also referred to it as a "second nature" or a "mechanism that works blindly to regulate the self" (Elias, 1994a: 113-446).

Norbert Elias emphasised the need for sociologists to avoid viewing social life from the perspective of entities or things, which Georg Simmel called 'reification', and instead to recognise it as dynamic social relations. The concept of 'figuration' in sociological theory consists of a dual movement: one towards an unwavering affirmation of social life as relational, and the other towards its practical nature. For Elias, the most significant aspect of interpersonal relations is the way they are constituted as relations of power, and he developed this argument further by referring to the "relational character of power" (Elias, 1978a: 75).

He wrote: "The whole social and political discussion of power is characterised by the fact that the dialogue does not constantly focus on power balances and power relations, but on power as if it were a thing" (Elias, 1987: 251).

According to Elias, if we see power as a relationship, we can also see that issues of power are quite different from issues of 'freedom' and 'domination', and that all human relationships are power relationships (Elias, 1978a: 74).

He understood power in terms of power relations or fluctuating balances of tension and found these concepts more appropriate for discussions of freedom and inevitability (Elias, 1993: 145).

Elias argued that it was important to move beyond thinking in terms of the imaginary contradiction between freedom and 'inevitability' due to the interdependence of human beings, and to move to thinking in terms of power relations. He emphasised the reciprocal nature of power relations, where less powerful groups exert an influence that rebounds on those who have greater opportunities for power (ibid: 265).

According to Elias, concepts such as "authority" or "power" often only reveal the pressures exerted from the top down, but not the pressures exerted from the bottom up.

He gave the example of the parent-child relationship, noting that parents have more power than their children, but because children perform certain functions and fulfil certain needs for their parents, they also have power over their parents (Elias, 1997b: 195).

9- The process of civilisation:

Norbert Elias focused on the concept of "civilisation" in analysing the origins of modern Western societies in the late eighteenth century, when Europeans understood it simply as an expression of their superior talents (Elias, 1994a: 41).

Elias defined 'civilisation' by stating: 'Henceforth, at least those nations that became colonial conquerors served as a kind of upper class for large parts of the non-European world, justifying their rule' (ibid: 41).

Europeans had a self-image of being particularly civilised, while at the same time being immersed in horrific barbarism. It was around this that Elias organised his observations on the development of modern social life, which he felt went to the heart of the distinctive psychological formation of contemporary Western societies. He argued that the shaping of instinctual life, including its repressive aspects, is a function of social interdependencies that persist throughout life, and that these interdependencies change with changes in the

structure of society. He emphasised that a significant part of his motivation in writing *The Process of Civilization* was to better understand the barbarity of the Nazi regime, because one cannot understand the collapse of civilised behaviour and feelings as long as they can be understood. He explained how civilised behaviour and sentiments originated and developed primarily in European societies (Elias, 1994a: 5-444).

10- Conclusions:

This perspective offers several thought-provoking insights into the impact of the emergence and subsequent monopolisation of power by the state on the development of organised crime. It also highlights the relevance of Elias's views on power dynamics for understanding the motives and structures of contemporary criminal organisations. Applying Elias' concept of 'reconfiguring the social fabric' to analyse the emergence of new forms of crime, such as cybercrime or white-collar crime, provides a valuable framework for understanding the complex landscape of crime. It reminds us that deviance is not just an individual aberration, but often a symptom of deeper societal imbalances and power struggles.

By exploring the intricate relationship between individual emotions, collective aspirations and the process of civilisation, Elias's theory provides valuable insights into the roots and development of criminal behaviour. It reminds us that crime is not a static phenomenon, but a dynamic interplay between societal expectations and individual choices, constantly shaped and reshaped by the ongoing quest for order and stability.

Elias emphasises the non-teleological nature of social life and argues against a direct causal relationship between human actions and their outcomes. This challenges the idea that individual actors alone are responsible for deviance and crime. However, he does not advocate complete randomness, but proposes a more nuanced understanding in which unplanned processes and human actions are intricately intertwined.

Elias suggests that understanding the functional connections that may seem meaningless is key to improving our control over social life. These connections are the unintended consequences of human interactions that shape social structures and influence individual behaviour. He believes that we can master and understand these connections through systematic study and recognition of their distinct and interrelated nature.

The Eliasian perspective challenges us to move beyond simplistic explanations of crime as solely individual pathologies or moral failings. Instead, it encourages a critical examination of the social structures and historical processes that shape our understanding of 'civilisation' and the factors that contribute to the emergence of deviance and crime.

By acknowledging the contradictions and power dynamics inherent in the concept of 'civilisation', we can develop more precise and effective strategies for crime prevention and social justice.

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