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**New developments on Norbert Elias' theory:
an integration between the figural theory and the social network's theory¹**

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Abstract

This working paper has two main challenges: a) resume two contemporary theories to b) glimpse new developments from their integration. First, we resume the figural theory proposed by the German sociologist Norbert Elias, highlighting how disruptive and innovative his ideas are. Second, we resume the developments of the social network studies. Third, we seek to link both theories, so they aid each other achieving new developments. We illustrate the last step trying to convert part of Elias' arguments in *Mozart, Zur Soziologie eines Genies* in a network. The expected outcome is on the one hand, Elias' figural theory gain applications with calculus and visualization elements from the network studies. On the other hand, the social network studies gain theoretical robustness with Elias' theory.

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Figurational theory

Norbert Elias began to develop his figurational theory in the 1930s, and he kept developing it until his death in the 1990s. In this sense, we consider him as a contemporary sociologist with an innovative perspective about the dichotomy agency vs. structure, side by side with other famous sociologists that faced the same challenge, such as Pierre Bourdieu, Margareth Archer², Anthony Giddens, among others.

Elias has developed his own theory that tried to overcome this “hoax”. Firstly, he opposes himself to the dichotomy agency-society, considering the individual as necessarily dependent from the interdependence chains to which he/she belongs. He conceives the individual as an *open being (homo aperti)*, who differs radically from the *closed being (homo clausus)*. Moreover, he believes that the society is a set of *figurations*³.

The *homo clausus* is a way to understand the agency as something strictly limited to the individual choice and reflection, that is, the agency is always self-directed. In a different way, Elias understands the *homos aperti* as an individual whose agency and characteristics are in the

² As an illustration of other attempt of solving the problem, Archer reviews different theoretical lines to solve the problem of agency and culture, demonstrating how them fall into what she calls “conflationism.” She argues that much of the existing social theories present “culture” as a monolith, what she calls as “the myth of cultural integration.” According to Archer, we can overcome such problem by assuming an analytical dualism, so we can better observe how agency and structure are related. In this manner, she adopts the analytical distinction of "Cultural System Level" and “Socio-Cultural System” previously formulated by David Lockwood (1964). The Socio-Cultural Level embraces social relations and interactions, whereas the Cultural System embraces the cultural products that are logically related. None of the sociological theories she reviews hold the autonomy of both levels. In every case, one level has primacy over the other, thus falling into some kind of reductionism. This phenomenon is what she calls conflationism. She ranks conflationism as "downwards conflationism", "upwards conflationism", and "central conflationism" (Archer, 1988).

³ This concept was presented for the first time in the “Court Society” (1933).

balance we-I. This means that the society is not a set of aggregated individual actions or imposed structures⁴. In his conception, the individual is fundamentally oriented for the other. In this way, the individual is constraint by others as well as he/she establishes multiple relations with others. Therefore, the individual always depends of others. This is the foundational idea that support the figurational (or processual) theory that understands society as a set of *figurations*.

The figurations are composed by *interdependence networks* that connect the individuals, which are in asymmetric relations in the *power balance*⁵. The societies “are nothing else than figurations of interdependent men” (ELIAS, 2001, p. 43). Therefore, there are not isolated individuals, because the “individual is always a group member” (ELIAS, 1997, p. 28) and the groups, composed by interdependent individuals shape the society:

In a nutshell, each person that pass through another person without realizing him/her, like unlinked strangers in the street, indeed they are linked somehow through work, property, instincts or affection relations. The most different functions can become interdependent. The individual lives in an interdependent network (ELIAS, 1994a, p. 22).

In the analysis of a figuration, the singular individuals are presented as they can be observed: as own systems, opened, oriented to reciprocities, linked by many kinds of interdependences that form specific figurations (ELIAS, 2001, p. 51).

For Elias, the conception of individual is historical: it appeared in the XIV and XV centuries and has being deepening throughout the process of modernity formation in the West. Elias names as “civilizing process” the tension between orders and social prohibitions instilled in the

⁴ Elias does not discard these categories (structures and aggregated actions), because he understands that they are useful express differences from the observer point of view. However, he does not use them to construct the comprehension about the relation between agency and structure.

⁵ This concept was presented for the first time in the “Court Society” (1933).

human being, as the self-domain and the control of instincts. In this manner, the individual is formed by internalized social and historical relations.

The individuality is not only an outcome from a natural process, but specially an outcome from a social process that vary from society to society⁶. This variation depends on the historic time and this determines types of figurations and its interdependent networks. The individuals, according to their *habitus*⁷, constitutes the society, shaping it and being shaping by it. The figurations feature the individual personality and identity. The individuation process is relational and it is always related to the figuration to which the individual is linked (ELIAS, 1994a). The figurations are a pre-condition to the self-perception of the individual: “the sense that each person has about his/her own identity is strictly related to the relations between ‘we’ and ‘they’ inside the group and our position inside the group” (ELIAS, 1991, p. 139). From a figuration emerges the individual characteristics responsible for the differentiation between persons.

In “The Germans”, Elias presents how the identity traces of the German national group constitute an important layer of the *habitus*. The same idea appears in “The Established and Outsiders”: the interdependent relations between two groups (an older group and a newer group) influence in the self-image and in the self-representation of the members. The self-image of a person/self-image of a group is always related to how other group see them, that is, the social judgement has strong influences in the identity and personality formation (ELIAS, 2000). In the case of Winston Parva⁸, presented in “The Established and Outsiders”, the established nourished a superior self-image facing an inferior image for the outsiders. The established needed to build this inferior image for a group of persons because this conflict relation is also important to reinforce their own superior self-image. This interdependent relation between two

⁶ The idea of “individualization” is well developed in “The Civilizing Process” (I e II), “Mozart: the Sociology of a genius” and “The Germans”.

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⁸ An alias that Elias used for a community nearby London in his book “The Established and Outsiders”.

complementary and conflicted group composes a figuration. As we mentioned, the interdependent relations are supported by an unstable imbalance of power. The figuration encompasses, at the same time, a contrast (a dichotomy between dominated and dominators) and a unity (structural interdependence between two polarized groups). In this case of Winston Parva, the figuration's maintenance or alteration is possible through symbolic mechanisms, as gossips and compliments.

Network Theory

We can find some insights about Social Networks in the classical Social Theory. Sociologists, like Ferdinand Tönnies (2005) and Georg Simmel, presented the idea of groups in networks to explain social behaviors. Simmel (1992) pointed out the importance of some features of the network that impact in the interaction: the size of the network and the relations' likelihood. Tönnies argued that society is shaped by groups. These groups have relations of two different natures: a.) the "*gemeinschaften*" are composed by personal ties between individuals that share common values and beliefs and the "*gesellschaften*" are composed by informal and instrumental relations between individuals.

Besides these classical insights, the notion of "social network," as we understand nowadays, appeared in the Human Sciences in the writings of the British anthropologist A. Barnes (1954). He used the term to name relations between persons and social groups. The sociologist Jacob Moreno was another landmark to the development of a Sociology of Social Networks when he employed the "sociogram" as an instrument that allows us to position each person within a group in a graphic representation. Later, the idea was developed and used to name a set of methods, concepts, theories and models that have as an object of study the relations between individuals and how their relations impact in their behavior.

The network is a metaphorical and representational idea to understand how the individuals are connected between each other and how they are positioned in this relation. "The idea that supports the network metaphor is the individual in a society that is connected through social

ties which can be reinforced or can be in conflict” (ACIOLI, 2007, p. 3). This conception is very similar to the elisian idea of figuration, but increased with a graphic representation that can count with measurements of relations.

This graphic representation can be generated as a network structure. The network structure is more complex than the classic sociograms, since the sociograms are just a general overview about the relations without any kind of metrics to weighted them.

Usually the individuals are represented by nodes and the relations are represented by ties. For that, we use graphics and mathematical analysis (graph theory) combined with qualitative data (interviews, speech act, etc.). The network structure has some algorithms behind it that can measure and weight the a) density of a relation (strong/weak); b) the spatial centrality of an individual and; c) the reciprocity (the extension of the mutual relation between individuals). According to Acioli (2007), “the possibility to perceive relations more or less symmetric; more or less dense; indicate the differences in the information channels and consequently different patterns of communications between the network members” (p. 5).

The virtual dimension is a new reality with which the Human Sciences are facing and must approach it. Our proposition to update the Figural Sociology through the Social Network Sociology is one way to tackle with this problem.

In the last two decades, social network services such as Orkut, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Facebook have emerged. Other virtual services dedicated to media such as Youtube (videos), Instagram (pictures) and Flickr (pictures) have also embedded social network configurations in their structure. These technologies are adding more complexity to social relationships. However, such services have modeled their data in networks data structure, indicating how fruitful such approach to understand social relationships and groups dynamics are.

Links between both theories: network and figural

We see in works as “The Court Society” and “The Germans” that Elias develops his figural theory at the same time he is describing and discovering his empirical object. The rich

descriptions are important to the reader visualize what he is explaining. However, it is hard to work with the elisian theoretical framework to understand and analyze a new empirical object. This because, he does not present the theory separated to the empirical object. Besides, although it is very rich to see how Elias describes in detail all the features of a figuration, it is especially hard to visualize and measure how these relations are configured.

Thus, we believe that some integration or bridges between the figuration theory and the network theory could clarify and enrich both theories. In this manner, the network theory could provide more resources to understand how and why the individuals of a figuration are linked between them, composing dynamic and specific sets (MERCKLÉ, 2004).

Norbert Elias' Mozart and how far graph theory can go

We choose Elias book on Mozart to see how graph theory can fit to Elias explanation, what else it can provide as well as what could be a gap. This work provides “the elaboration of a verifiable theoretical model of the figuration that a person - in this case, an eighteenth-century artist - formed in his interdependence with other social figures of the time” (ELIAS, 1991, p. 19).

Mozart is a good example since he has died, accordingly Elias, when he felt himself detach from all his most valued ties. “There are many reasons to believe that in his last years of life he felt increasingly that he had lost both [The love of a woman he could trust, and the Viennese public's love for his music]” (ELIAS, 1991, p. 9). If we could translate it to a network representation, Mozart would be almost a solitary node, without ties, or only with weak ties. “At the end of his life, he was abandoned by almost everyone who had once been his close friends” (ELIAS, 1991, p. 9).



Figure 1 – Single node with no ties: Mozart in his life's end.

Constanze, Mozart’s wife, admired her husband talents. Mozart’s talent was the main reason that maintained her interest for him. Once the Viennese court had abandoned Mozart, his talent was in question. According to Elias, it was the main reason for his wife having abandoned him. “Constanze’s vision of his talent was undoubtedly shaken, as well as her view of his person” (ELIAS, 1991, p. 11). Translating Elias’ arguments to the graph theory, when Mozart and the Court were untied, a relationship that could be label as ‘talent recognition’, it weakened the tie between Mozart and Constanze, which depended on the court recognition.

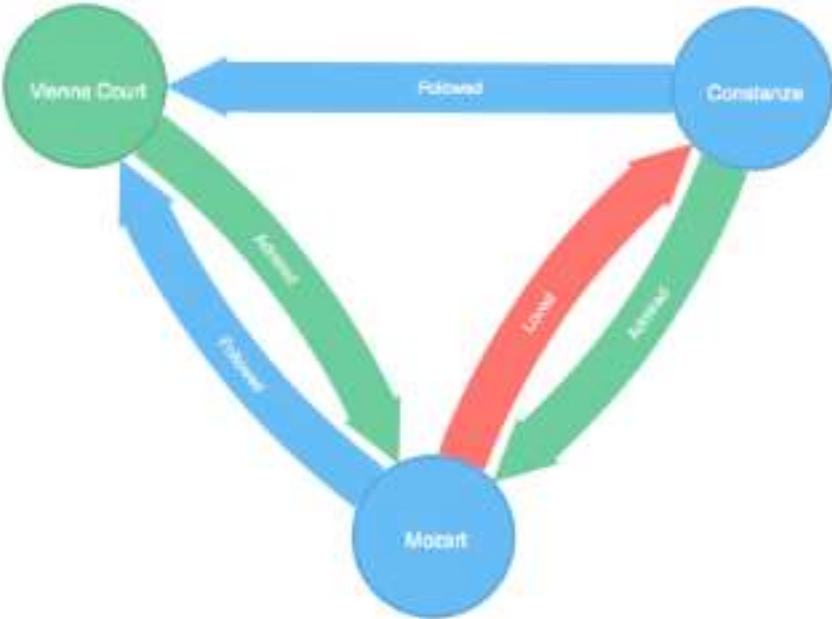


Figure 2 – Ties between Mozart, Constance, and the Court as described by Elias

That is exactly the situation Elias has been describing; an equilibrium among the ties, in which Mozart has two in-degrees labeled in green as ‘Admired’, and two out-degrees one labeled as ‘Loved’ and the other as ‘Followed’ (as a generic and arbitrary label that could represent some asymmetrical relationship). When the Court loses its interest in Mozart, he loses his in-degree tie of Admiration, which causes Constant to weaken and eventually untie her admiration for him. It has created an unbalance situation in which Mozart had more out-degrees to these nodes

that he valued most, coinciding with his moment of despair, depression and sickness: “It seems that in the end, Mozart lived in a state of solitude and despair” (ELIAS, 1991, p. 11). For Elias, Mozart’s self-image and self-love were deeply connected. When Mozart lost the source of recognition of his own self-image (the recognition of his talent and his wife), his self-love was completely shaken.

It was an easy task to verify how his fall could be illustrated in a very straightforward network and such network help us draw in our minds the social relationships abstraction. However, some ties are extremely more complex and historically formed such as the admiration of the Court for Mozart’s talent. Could such process be represented as well? In Mozart’s epoch, a musician who wished to be socially recognized as a serious artist and at the same time wanted to keep himself and his family, had to get a place in the network of the institutions of the court or its ramifications. What we call as “princely court” was essentially the palace of the prince. Most people who followed a musical career were of non-noble origin, a bourgeois, and within the Court they were *outsiders*.

[...] relations between masters and servants - even the middle-level ones [...] - were much more personal, even at the imperial court of Vienna and certainly in the small court of the archbishop of Salzburg, than the relations between Directors and managers of a large commercial enterprise of our day [...] The social distance was immense, but the spatial distance, very small. People were always together, the master was always around (ELIAS, 1991, p. 21).

However, the good artist had an even closer relationship.

What the network representation cannot represent well is the content of a tie. By “content”, we mean the way by which the relationship happens or even is instantiated. For example, it’s not easy to represent that Mozart could not hide his feelings or show them in an ingratiating fashion, and that he hated any form of human relationship that forced him to use circumlocutions and euphemisms or to make detours (ELIAS, 1991, p. 23). On the other hand, it is maybe possible to represent a general positioning that Mozart (as many other artists) lived in his time:

“Mozart lived the fundamental ambivalence of the bourgeois artist in court society, which can be summarized in the following dichotomy: identification with the nobility of the court and his taste; Resentment at the humiliation she was imposing on him” (ELIAS, 1991, p. 24).

The way the relationships happen are vital to Elias. For example, he recognizes that to Mozart be well-succeeded, his appropriate behavior should be so important as his musical talents. Mozart had problems with his behavior and that is why the Court abandoned him. His behavioral problems can be translated as the refusal of submitting his work entirely to others demands. He faced that with the Prince of Salzburg (his first employer) and he fired himself. We can recognize here the peculiarity of the market that Mozart had at his disposal. Even as an "autonomous artist" he still depended, like any artisan artist, on a limited local circle of clients. And it was a very tight circle, strongly integrated. If rumor had it that the emperor did not have a musician especially in account, the good society simply put it aside.

By giving up the hated court service, Mozart was not independent of the court hearing. On the contrary, above all, they were members of Viennese aristocratic society, such as Prince Gallitzin or the Thun family, who awoke to the idea of earning a living independently with the local music market, with no employer or guaranteed income (ELIAS, 1991, p. 41)

The potential market that awaited Mozart, when he switched from the court musician to a relatively autonomous artist, was much more restricted. Institutions are able to mount operas, balloons and large orchestral works were still largely limited to cut-thrown cities such as Munich, Mannheim, Berlin or Prague. At the time of Mozart, Vienna, seat of the imperial court, had a prominent position among the others, while cultural movements, especially in Literature and Philosophy, flourished in other German regions, and addressed a bourgeois audience external to the courts, were somewhat drained in Vienna (ELIAS, 1991).

In the second figure, we can only see emotional ties among the nodes. However, we could step forward in the visualization by adding a new kind of relationship: a cognitive one. Thus, we can translate the direct relation of the Court to Mozart (as a person), to Mozart's work. Once

Mozart's work was of no interest to the Court, they became untied. Another step is opening the Court node, which behave as a black box - a "generalized other" in George H. Mead's words. However, such step provides a limitation, since Elias himself did not finish a deep analysis for the period when Mozart was in Vienna. Maybe he just could not do that due to the complexity of the task. However, there are some fragmentary elements throughout the book that could be reorganized and then visualized.

In the following visualization we see the figuration as a network of the best moment of Mozart's life, the moment when he produced his best productions, got married, and has his talent widely recognized by the Court.

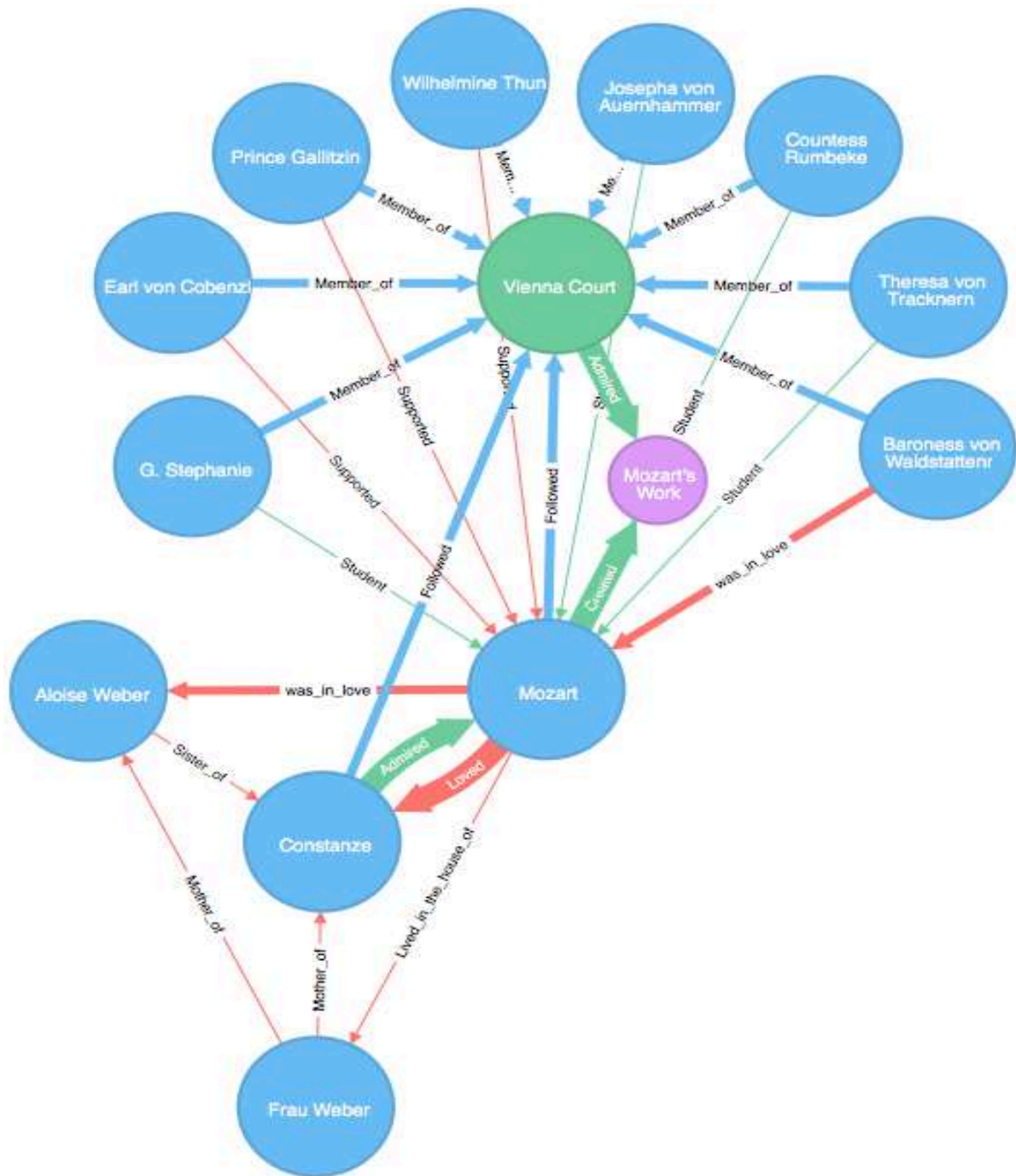


Figure 3 – Mozart's figuration in his golden days in a network visualization

In this visualization is possible to clearly see two main cluster of people, a) the first cluster at the top of the image are the nobles, members of the Court and were personally related to with Mozart, and b) the second cluster at the bottom of the image is the family of his wife. Both groups converge to Elias' narrative, who treated all others as unimportant. Of course, one easily

loses track of the narrative when many different characters are introduced. In order to achieve more understandability, a solution is to ignore every character that is not important enough. However, if the author could keep a simple database in parallel with the writing of his main text to visualize it later, he/she would get at least insights benefits from a network visualization.

So, we propose that the network visualization provides readability to the audience as well as insights to the author. It has strong limitations, especially when one tries to characterize psychological variables as Elias does, or when try to represent complex interrelationships in personal drama over time, for example the struggle that Mozart had with his employer and his father.

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