

## **Reconsidering Feminisms and the Work of Norbert Elias for Understanding Gender, Sport and Sport-related Activities**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reconsiders the relationships between feminist perspectives and the figurational/process sociological perspective of Norbert Elias for understanding gender, sport and sport-related activities. The main aim of the article is to respond to Colwell's (1999) claim that there are differences between feminist and figurational approaches to understanding and explaining gender that potentially negate the possibility of being a feminist and figurational sociologist at the same time. The paper makes a contribution to the wider discussions about the adequacy of Elias's work in understanding gender and sport, and the potential of blending feminist and figurational perspectives on sport and gender. The essay introduces the principles underlying feminist and figurational approaches to sociology. The key features of the on-going debate about the differences between feminist and figurational approaches are briefly outlined. I reply to Colwell's (1999) criticisms of my work and revisit issues surrounding the role of values and evaluation in sociology. Involved-detachment is introduced as a feminist interpretation of Elias's theory of ever changing balances of involvement-detachment. The final part of the paper presents some reflections about working with involved-detachment in specific research on women's involvement in sport-related fitness activities.

**Key Words: Feminisms, Figurational/Process-Sociology, Gender, Femininities, Sport**

This article re-examines the relationships between feminisms and the figurational or process-sociological approach of Norbert Elias for understanding gender, sport and sport-related activities. The main aim is to challenge Colwell's (1999: 220) claim that there is a "potentially incontrovertible difference" between feminist and figurational perspectives that limits the possibility of a synthesis between the approaches in understanding sport and gender. The paper also represents a contribution to the debate

that is founded on claims that Elias and figurational sociologists are relatively silent on gender issues (Hargreaves, 1992, 1994; Horne and Jary, 1987), and that Elias's work is limited in answering questions about gender (Hargreaves, 1992, 1994). The essay introduces the key principles underlying feminist and figurational approaches to sociology. It provides a brief overview of nearly three decades of work on the differences and potential common ground between feminist and figurational approaches to the study of gender and sport. A reply to Colwell's (1999) criticisms of my work with Maguire is presented. I re-examine the role of values and evaluation in sociology as part of my response to Colwell's (1999: 236) suggestion that there is little chance of reconciliation between feminist and figurational approaches in understanding sport and gender, and that a synthesis between the perspectives is "untenable". In this paper the potential of blending principles from feminist and figurational/process sociology is argued for by considering a feminist interpretation of Elias's ideas about involvement-detachment as a balance. Working with involved-detachment is advocated as a way of balancing an involved position with an appropriate balance of detachment. Specific examples connected to the use of life history interviews and documentary sources in research on female, femininities and fitness are presented in support of the position of involved-detachment.

### **Feminist and Figurational/Process Sociology: Key Principles**

Within the limits of this journal article it is not possible to present a detailed account of feminist theories. However, it should be noted from the outset: "to lay claim to the title 'feminist' is not to adhere to a certain orthodoxy" (Whelehan, 1995: 20). Feminisms are not represented by a single discrete theory. There are several strands or waves of feminist thought which are linked to many theories and which have developed out of efforts to challenge the hegemony of a variety of male cultures. While there are on-going debates about feminist theories for understanding competing masculinities, and men in feminisms, the heterogeneous nature of feminist theories reflects the activities of a

diverse set of interests which are dominated by a common theme; the examination of the position of women in society (Whelehan, 1995).

Within feminisms, the nature and character of different women's positions in society is contested and there are overlaps and conflicts in relation to a feminist political agenda. Nevertheless feminist theorists embrace a political commitment, or sometimes an ethical commitment, to identifying and challenging social injustices faced by women (Wilson, 1986). This does not mean that feminist research is devoted to examinations of traditional ideas about women as inferior and subordinate to men. Different feminists give primacy to particular issues and increasingly the complexities of gender are being examined in terms of women's relationships with men and with other women, and men's relationships with men. Furthermore, it should be noted that it is not wrong to focus on female culture and female sport in studies of gender if one is aware of uneven gender relations that make possible female dominance over other females, female dominance over males, and male dominance over males, as well as male dominance over females. The hallmark of sports feminism is "a commitment to an explicitly theoretical approach to the interpretation of sport as a gendered activity" (Birrell, 2002: 61). The complexities of gender relations in sport and sport related activities have been brought to the fore by feminists considering women and men, and masculinities and femininities, in relational terms and by articulating, for example, the connections between gender and sex, race-ethnicity, social class and disability (Birrell, 1988, 2002; Hargreaves, 1994; Scraton and Flintoff, 2002).

It is also not my intention to provide a comprehensive overview of the form of sociological inquiry argued for by figurational/process sociologists (Elias, 1978; Mennell, 1992; Van Krieken, 1998). However, Van Krieken's (1998: 6-7) account of the overlapping principles underlying figurational/process sociology provides a useful framework for introducing Norbert Elias's approach. The five principles concern the character of human social life and are as follows: (1) human acts involve mechanisms

which transform intentional human action into unintended, unplanned patterns of relationships which take place over longer and shorter periods of time; (2) human beings only exist in interdependent relationships with others; (3) human social life is characterized by a diverse set of shifting relations underpinned by ever-changing balances of power; (4) human societies can only be understood in terms of long-term processes of change; and (5) sociological thinking is characterized by a balance and blend of emotional involvement in and detachment from topics of research. The application of these principles led Elias to develop several arguments connected to the role of the state in social development, science as a social institution, the inextricable relationship between social development (*sociogenesis*) and developments in personality structures (*psychogenesis*), and power relations in terms of a tension-balance between established and outsiders groups.

Having outlined the principles of feminist and figurational/process sociology, an overview of claims about the differences and overlapping features of each perspective, as they have been discussed in the sociology of sport, is presented.

### **Feminisms and Figurational/Process Sociology: Tensions and Potentials in the Sociology of Sport.**

My response to Colwell (1999) represents a contribution to the dialogue between feminists and figurational sociologists of sport that has existed since the 1980s. The details of the discussions that have occurred during the past three decades can be found in the extant literature (Dunning, 1992; Colwell, 1999; Hargreaves, 1992, 1994; Liston, 2007 forthcoming; Maguire and Mansfield, 1998; Mansfield, 2002). The debate between feminist and figurational/process sociologists of sport concerns three interrelated themes: (1) the role of values and evaluation in sociology; (2) the adequacy of Elias's work in understanding gender; (3) and the potential of blending feminist and figurational perspectives in understanding sport and gender.

In terms of the polemic surrounding the role of values and evaluation in sociological research, Liston (2007, forthcoming) points out that exchanges between feminists and figurationists have emerged as part of wider academic deliberations about: the status of sociology as a 'science'; the 'scientific' legitimacy of research and scholarship in the sociology of sport; and developments in both feminist and figurational sociology for understanding sport and gender. Liston (2007, forthcoming) also highlights that the academic context for the emerging debate between feminist and figurational sociologists of sport surrounds feminist examinations of; the definitions and sources of women's oppression in sport, problems and patterns of gender power relations in sport, motivations and meanings of female involvement in sport, and political commitments of feminists in challenging the gendered nature of sport. Given such debates, it is evident that several feminist scholars have made a significant contribution to advancing our knowledge and understanding of gender and sport since the 1980s (Birrell, 1988, 2000; Cole, 1993, 2002; Caudwell, 1999; Hall, 1996; Hargreaves, 1994, 2000; Markula, 1995, 2003; Scraton, 1992; Scraton and Flintoff, 2002; Theberge, 1985, 2002). It is also the case that figurational sociologists have contributed to the developing body of knowledge about gender and sport over the past 25 years (Dunning, 1986; Dunning and Maguire, 1996; Liston, 2006a, 2006b; Maguire, 1986; Sheard and Dunning, 1973). It is not my intention to explore the details of such contributions but the developments of Hargreaves' research on females, sport and gender and Dunning's work on males, sport and gender can be taken to provide the more specific context for discussions between feminist and figurational sociologists of sport. As Liston (2007, forthcoming) expresses it, figurational contributions to understandings of sport and gender in the 1980s and early 1990s, and a feminist response to those contributions signal "round one" and "round two" respectively of the "feminist-figurational sociology exchange". I now address the specific aspects of the debate as they have emerged since the 1990s.

Hargreaves (1992) offered the first feminist critique of figurational scholarship on sport and leisure. Her criticisms were based on her view that “the figurational perspective is markedly masculinist” and embodies “limitations in dealing with gender” (Hargreaves, 1992: 161). She criticizes Norbert Elias’s “paradigm for sociological analysis” for its focus on male experiences, marginalization of females and neglect of the gender dimension. Hargreaves (1992: 163) is critical of figurational work in the sociology of sport and leisure because she says, the emphasis on male cultures and masculinity does not account for:

“the ways in which starkly uneven gender relations make possible male dominance in different spheres of culture and sport and the reasons and effects of men appropriating cultural and state power to control the usages and ways of life for both sexes”.

Since 1992 several authors have replied to Hargreaves (Dunning, 1992; Maguire and Mansfield, 1998; Colwell, 1999; Murphy et al. 2000). The responses generally accept the criticism that, until the 1990s, the majority of figurational sociologists have not explicitly explored gender relations in sport. Furthermore, there is some agreement that, in the 1980s and before figurational sociologists predominantly focused on male sport and male culture, although that does not necessarily mean it did not contribute to understandings of gender. In terms of Sheard and Dunning’s (1973) subcultural study of Rugby Football, for example, Birrell (1998: 481) notes that “because it focused so clearly on males, it was not fully recognized for its importance to feminist scholarship until gender relations was recognized as the proper focus of the field”. Since the 1990s an increasing amount of theoretical and empirical work has drawn on the principles of figurational sociology in examining female involvement in sport and sport related activities (see for example, Colwell, 1999; Dunning and Maguire, 1996; Liston, 2006a, 2006b; Maguire and Mansfield, 1998; Mansfield and Maguire, 1999).

Hargreaves (1992) also claims that the neglect of gender in figurational accounts of sport and leisure is tied up with a “quest for detachment” which, in her view, embodies the idea that figurational sociologists can “exceptionally, impartially separate themselves from their own histories and consciousness” (Hargreaves, 1992: 162). In Hargreaves’ (1992: 165) terms “the concept of detachment is a ‘slippery’ one”. She argues, “because it claims to be objective and uncritical, in a subtle but fundamental manner it is supporting the popular idea that sport is more suited to men than to women and represents a celebration of the work of male bonding and male sport”. (Hargreaves, 1992: 165). It is agreed by proponents of Elias’s work that Hargreaves’ (1992: 165) assessment of “the concept of detachment” has misinterpreted the theory of involvement-detachment. I do not wish to repeat existing commentaries about involvement-detachment here although I outline and investigate further issues of involvement-detachment later on in the paper.

The competing positions outlined by Colwell (1999) and Mansfield (1998, 2002) signal the development of the debate between feminists and figurational sociologists of sport in the ten years since Hargreaves’ (1992) critique and responses to it. In 1998 I envisaged a potential synthesis between feminist and figurational approaches for understanding gender, bodies and sporting practices. I argued that understanding the dynamic and relational nature of social processes over time was a principle feature of figurational sociology which overlapped with the primary concern of feminists in the sociology of sport as illustrated by Hargreaves’ (1992: 166) comment that in order to understand women’s oppression in sport, we must “confront actual, existing social situations and historical processes that have produced current gender inequalities and constraints”. In 1998 the purpose of the work was to draw on feminist principles and some key figurational concepts linked to power, identities and habituses, and ideas about bodies and civilizing processes to understand female involvement in the fitness activity of aerobics (exercise to music). It was pointed out, in the 1998 article, that



neither feminisms nor figurational sociology could provide all the answers to complex questions about gender relations. However, we did suggest that each perspective could make a contribution to understanding gender and sport and: “perhaps a union between feminist scholarship and figurational sociology can offer ways in which women can challenge gendered social practices” (Maguire and Mansfield, 1998: 115).

Colwell’s (1999:233) response was to use the Maguire and Mansfield (1998) paper to “demonstrate the difficulties of synthesizing feminist and figurational approaches”. Colwell (1999) was critical of what she viewed as the tendency, in that paper, to treat women as a homogenous group, to reify, to generalize about ‘patriarchy’ and to make value judgments about notions of femininity. But the main criticism of the work was, in Colwell’s (1999: 235) words, “the failure to address what seems to be a critical issue, and, indeed stumbling block between attempts to synthesize feminist and figurational approaches, the question of values”. She argues that, as part of a political agenda, feminists require critical, evaluative approaches in understanding gender relations. By contrast she argues that figurationists maintain that it is not necessary to evaluate social relations in order to understand them. According to Colwell (1999: 235-236) feminists wishing to embrace the principles of figurational sociology face “potential difficulties” in terms of reconciling their “ideological and political beliefs with a figurational approach”. Her suggestion for a possible reconciliation was to say that “it may be possible to be a feminist informed figurational sociologist’, but to be ‘feminist-figurationalist’ seems untenable” (Colwell, 1999: 236). Her conclusion to the issue of reconciliation between feminists and figurational sociologists was to say that:

“Given that evaluation is such a central, indeed integral, feature of feminist accounts, and that it is equally strongly rejected in figurational accounts, it is suggested that this is perhaps the limit of the extent to which feminist and figurational approaches can be reconciled” (Colwell, 1999: 236).

In 2002, I attempted to lay the foundations for a more informed dialogue between feminist and figural sociologists in the sociology of sport. Highlighting that feminist analyses of sport encompass “a complexity of approaches, positions and strategies that are both temporally and culturally grounded” I outlined some of the overlapping themes, issues and concepts of each perspective (Mansfield, 2002: 318). I identified four main themes of a feminist figural approach to investigating gender and sports practices which were concerned with understanding: (1) the relative empowerment of females in the ‘male preserve’ of sport, and the extent to which they might challenge and change existing male-dominated organizations and values; (2) the motivations, meanings and significance of sport and exercise for women and the impact of their involvement on the construction of their sense of self identity; (3) the active role that women have to play in interpreting their experiences in the ‘sporting’ arena; and (4) the influence of feminism’s political commitment to identifying the diverse social encounters and conditions of women and transforming unequal gender relations.

In 2002, as in 1998, I argued that the common ground between the principles of feminisms and a figural approach is founded on an emphasis on the centrality of understanding the relational nature of gender through time and space. I argued that thinking with both a feminist sensitivity to female subjectivity and experience, and figural concepts associated with established-outsider relations, identification and habitus, and civilizing processes could help in understanding female involvement in sport and sport-related activities and balances of power between the sexes in sport and exercise. Central to my claims for a feminist-figural approach was a feminist commitment to challenging and transforming gender inequality. But I emphasized that the advancement of our funds of knowledge about gender relations, and any political action based on that knowledge, should be grounded in theoretically-informed empirical research. In my words “strong links should be developed between theory, evidence and

political action if the proposed synthesis is to offer ways in which gender inequality within sporting spheres can be challenged in a meaningful way” (Mansfield, 2002: 331).

Having outlined the main features of the feminist-figurational sociology debate since the 1990s I now respond to Colwell’s (1999) criticisms of my work with Maguire.

### **Feminisms and Figural Sociology: A Reply to Colwell (1999)**

Colwell (1999) is rightly critical of the tendency in the 1998 paper to reify about exercise regimes. The tendency towards reification; to treat concepts or social constructs as if they were willful persons, is commonplace in sociology (Elias and Dunning, 1986). Such an inaccuracy is evident in claims such as: “exercise perpetuates the objectification of female bodies” (Maguire and Mansfield, 1998: 134). Exercise does not perpetuate any social process. Colwell (1999) is right to point out that it is *people* who form sport and sport-related activities and it is *people* who establish and negotiate various social norms in a range of diverse sporting contexts. We should have said that within the context of the aerobics exercise class, the female participants establish and negotiate social norms surrounding images of femininity. Clearly, some of the arguments needed to be expressed in a more accurate and measured manner.

Colwell (1999) is also right to point out that, in the 1998 paper, there are examples where we *seem* to treat women as a homogenous group. When writing about “the interests of women”, we perhaps did not make it clear enough at that point in the paper that the term ‘woman’ represents diversity and difference in terms of class, race/ethnicity, age and disability. The claim that “it is the pursuit of the social body that is a negative strategy for women” is another example where difference and diversity within and between women in the exercise context does not appear to be fully explored. However, I would contend that Colwell’s examples of an *apparent* tendency to treat women as a homogenous group is somewhat out of context and there are various examples in the paper where the emphasis is on considerations of difference and diversity. While, we did not speak to issues of race/ethnicity, age, disability or social

class in any specific and detailed way it is stated that the women in the study “experience both the repressive and liberating features of aerobics in various degrees. Their experiences are similar yet different to other women in the group”. (Maguire and Mansfield, 1998: 111). There is an emphasis on examining the pattern of power relations between different groups of women in the aerobic exercise context and the discussion of established-outsider relations offers something in understanding the ways that some women’s actions serve to exclude or, at least marginalize, some other women in sporting contexts. We explain that the aerobics class might, at first sight, appear to be a female place, marked by “female solidarity” but on closer inspection aerobics is “marked by a series of power hierarchies between women” (Maguire and Mansfield, 1998: 121). The argument is: “A distinct type of rivalry exists between women in the exercise figuration in their quest for optimal performance and the achievement of better bodies” (Maguire and Mansfield, 1998: 122). As well as explaining that the pursuit of the body beautiful is potentially oppressive to women who participate in aerobics, we devoted a whole section of the paper to the idea that aerobics is a site for the arousal of pleasure and excitement. We illustrated that for some of the women in the study, exercise and the acquisition of an idealized physique is empowering, that is, “they experience feelings of confidence and self possession in connection with being physically active” (Maguire and Mansfield, 1998: 132). It is argued that to an extent the aerobics class provides “the performers with a sense of place in which there is the possibility that they can freely experience their bodies” (Maguire and Mansfield, 1998: 12). The paper concludes that, in the context of the study of aerobics, there is a paradox in the relationships between women, their bodies and exercise. In our words:

“many of the women in this study exercised in order to counter calorie intake and to discipline their uncontrolled bodies. For some there were feelings of pleasure associated with exercising, but these were located in a complex web of emotions.

The exercise habit evoked a cluster of feelings including excitement, enjoyment, shame, guilt and self-disgust". (Maguire and Mansfield, 1998: 135).

Colwell's (1999: 233) suggestion that "for *some* women the 'pursuit of the social body' may be a 'negative strategy', for others it may serve them well" is borne out in the examples I draw from the 1998 paper. Moreover, while Colwell's (1999) assessment of 'the pursuit of the social body' may go some way to avoiding the homogenizing tendency she accuses us of, it does not go far enough. In the comment above, she implies that there are only two possible and opposite consequences of pursuing an idealized physique; either the negative experience or some kind of empowering consequence. A more reality-congruent observation would be that women and men can experience, at the same time, liberating and repressive features associated with the pursuit of idealized bodies. The balance of liberating and repressive potential in pursuing an idealized body varies in relation to the long-term and complex links associated with fitness culture and gender, race/ethnicity, age, social class and disability.

There is substance in Colwell's (1999) claim that my 1998 paper with Maguire does not adequately examine the concept of patriarchy for understanding female involvement in sport and exercise. The concept of patriarchy has been central to feminist sociologists since the early twentieth century but debates surrounding its conceptualization have also concerned feminist researchers and we did not make this clear in the 1998 paper (Acker, 1989; Kemp & Squires, 1997; Hargreaves, 1994; Waters, 1989; Walby, 1989). Indeed, we used the term patriarchy without clarification. In some respects, I would confess that I had not distanced myself from modes of feminist thinking which tend to refer, uncritically, to patriarchy as "the social system of masculine domination over women" (Pilcher and Whelehan, 2005: 93). I would, now, abandon the use of patriarchy as a theoretical concept. There are several feminist reformulations of the concept that are founded on criticisms of it as ahistorical, reductionist and inadequate in understanding gender relations involving relationships between and within

groups of women and men (Acker, 1989; Pilcher and Whelehan, 2005; Waters, 1989; Walby, 1989). Elias (1986) also brought into question the term patriarchy as a concept for understanding the balance of power between the sexes. Elias (1986, p. 315) suggests that *andrarchic*, meaning men-dominated, and *gynarchic*, meaning women-dominated are more accurate terms for use in analysis of relationships between the sexes than *patriarchal*, meaning “men in their capacity as fathers” and *matriarchal* meaning “women in their capacity as mothers”. Furthermore, his concept of power balances or power ratios enables sociologists to perceive the power differentials between groups of women and men, or between groups of women, or in relationships between men and men as “shades and grades” rather than in terms of static polarities (Elias, 1986, p. 289).

On this basis, I agree with Colwell (1999) that my preliminary attempts at examining the relationships between feminisms and figurational sociology did not adequately examine the feminist assumptions in my work. While it was never the purpose of a necessarily selective journal article to present a detailed discussion of the role of values in sociology, some comment would have added to the discussion in the 1998 paper and, indeed, would have made clear the character and adequacy of what feminists refer to as reflexivity; the critical analysis of theoretical issues and the research process.

While Whelehan (1995) points out that reflexivity characterizes the development of feminist thought over at least the past two decades, aspects of feminisms do, as Colwell (1999) explains, remain somewhat problematic in terms of an approach to the advancement of knowledge in the sociology of sport. In his comments about figurational sociology and feminist cultural studies Dunning (1992: 255) questions whether the “simple replacement of an unexamined masculinist problematic” by “an equally unexamined feminist one is a route to desirable social change or, indeed, whether such change will be possible without greater knowledge”. Dunning (1992: 255) explains that

what unites all sociologists is “our view that our primary concern as *sociologists* should be to contribute to knowledge in the hope that it will facilitate an improvement in the efficacy of political action by changing the balance between its knowledge-based and ideological contents in favour of the former”. As Colwell (1999) quite rightly highlights, what is principally at issue in the debate between feminists and figurationists is the value-orientation of sociologists. In other words, the debate is about the status and generation of knowledge that suffuses the sociological endeavour. In Elias’s terms issues of involvement-detachment are central to debates about the advancement of knowledge in sociology.

### **Ever-changing Balances of Involvement-Detachment**

According to Elias there are degrees of objectivity and value-bias in all aspects of human social life. Human beings have a capacity for greater or lesser detachment and involvement. A key point concerning issues of involvement-detachment is that Elias did not claim to be neutral, objective and have the ability to escape from personal ideals and commitments. All human behaviour varies on a continuum of involvement-detachment and it is normally the case that people do not become so absolutely involved in social life that they abandon their feelings completely, nor do they remain wholly unmoved by events and relationships of which they are a part. Mennell (1992: 161) highlights: “the balance of involvement and detachment seen in normal adult behaviour varies between different groups. Within those groups, it varies from one situation to another. It may vary greatly between different individuals in similar situations”. On this basis one can say that involvement-detachment balances vary in type and, furthermore, issues of involvement-detachment may be the foundation for differing degrees and blends of conflict and consensus.

The theory of involvement-detachment is central to Elias’s position on the subject of science and values. Traditionally, discussions of the relationship between scientific knowledge and values have centered on the abstract dichotomy between ‘objectivity’

and 'subjectivity'. Proponents from each side of the polarity argue either that sociologists should be 'value-free' (objective), or that it is inevitable that sociological researchers will be 'value-laden' (subjective). The problem that Elias was addressing in his ideas about involvement-detachment concerned "the general issue of how to achieve 'valid' knowledge of society whilst investigating it from within" (Kilminster, 2004: 26). It was a contribution to the debate about achieving value-freedom in the sciences. It was a way of challenging still enduring conceptions of human beings as *homo clauses*; as singular persons, individual 'subjects' of knowledge, locked into ways of thinking and acting that are somehow isolated from others. Elias's (1978, 1987) starting point was to think of human beings as interdependent, *homines aperti* (open people) bonded in various ways and degrees. The theory of involvement-detachment developed as a way of dissolving dichotomies such as free will/determinism (agency/ structure) and individual/society. As Kilminster (2004: 26) explains:

"It provided him with the simple but powerful means by which to show that many conventionally posed epistemological problems, such as 'How do I know what I know?', 'How do we perceive social patterns when all we experience is individual action? Or 'is my action free or determined? embodied individualistic, *homo clauses* assumptions".

Elias introduced the terms involvement and detachment so as to avoid the assumption inherent in terms such as objectivity and subjectivity, or rational and irrational, or passion and reason, that the psychological and social characters of human beings are separate. His arguments about the growth of scientific knowledge are connected to a central feature of his theory on civilizing processes; that over very long periods of time increasing standards of detachment are only possible with increasing standards of self-control. In Dunning's (1992: 249) account: " one of the preconditions for the growth of modern science, he [Elias] suggested, was an increase in specific (but later widening) groups in the socially instilled capacity of their members to exercise self-



distanciation and self-restraint". For Elias (1987: 34-35), in the natural sciences, the dominance of "autonomous evaluations"; ones which embody questions about fact and order of events which are institutionalized as part of a set of professional standards, represent a relatively high level of detachment compared to the social sciences in which "heteronomous evaluations" prevail. Heteronomous evaluation refers to the intrusion of values related to personal wishes and interests "from outside, from positions taken up within conflicts of society at large" (Elias, 1987: 34). This should not be taken to mean that autonomy and heteronomy are absolutes. Autonomy-heteronomy is a balance. Furthermore, the autonomy-heteronomy balance does not just relate to the character of research paradigms. Involvement-detachment issues come to the fore at every level of research. As will be discussed in the final part of this paper, in terms of sociological investigations, involvement-detachment should be thought of as an ever-changing balance of emotional involvement-detachment with topics, theories and methods of research.

Having outlined involvement-detachment as a balance, I offer an assessment of the adequacy of Colwell's (1999) claim that there is a significant difference between feminist and figural approaches to the question of values and evaluation in sociological research that militates against a synthesis between the perspectives.

### **Feminisms and Figural/Process Sociology: Evaluation as a Balance**

In the sociology of sport, one of the main criticisms of some feminist theorizing that directly relates to the value-orientation of sociologists concerns the presentation of more ideologically-based analyses over more knowledge-based accounts in feminist work (Dunning, 1992; Colwell, 1999). Colwell (1999) sees the problem resulting from a fundamental difference between feminist and figural perspectives. For her, figuralists hold the view that *evaluation* of social phenomena is not necessary in order to understand them, whereas, a "critical evaluative approach" must be central to feminist theorising because "non-critical approaches depoliticize sports feminism, and thus

implicitly support the status quo” (Colwell, 1999: 219-220). At first sight, this might represent a “key” difference between the two perspectives (Colwell, 1999: 220). On closer examination, however, Colwell’s (1999: 220) claim that different requirements for evaluation of social phenomena result in a “potentially incontrovertible” difference between feminisms and figural sociology, negating the possibility of a synthesis between them, can be refuted. Central to the discussion that follows is my view that feminist researchers could harness the theory of involvement-detachment in advancing knowledge about gender relations in sport and sport-related activities.

Colwell’s (1999) assertion that being a feminist necessitates critical evaluations of social relations in order to understand them, but being a figural sociologist renders it unnecessary to evaluate social phenomena appears to fix a clear-cut and artificial division between the perspectives. Although Colwell (1999) examines the theory of involvement-detachment as a way of developing more adequate social explanations, and emphasizes that figural theorists seek to think in fluid, and processual terms, rather than static and oppositional ways, she presents a mutually exclusive choice between feminisms and a figural approach because, in her view, there are distinct differences in the nature of evaluation in each perspective. On the basis of a critical evaluation of the work of selected sports feminists, rather than on any empirically-informed research of her own, she maintains that “to be a ‘feminist-figurationist’ seems untenable” (Colwell, 1999: 236). Her position is based on the claim that “evaluation is such a central, indeed integral, feature of feminist accounts, and that it is equally strongly rejected in figural accounts” (Colwell, 1999: 236).

To say, as Colwell (1999: 236) does, that evaluation is “strongly rejected” by figural sociologists and that the strength of that rejection is equal to the strength of acceptance of evaluation in feminist sociology somewhat misrepresents Elias’s (1987) theory of involvement-detachment by suggesting that feminists and figural sociologists are positioned at opposite extremes of an evaluation/non-evaluation

dichotomy. In her statement: “the term ‘feminist-figurational’ is, arguably a contradiction in terms”, the use of the word ‘contradiction’ compounds the implication that, in her view, and in terms of the requirements for evaluation, the two perspectives are oppositional (Colwell, 1999: 235). On this basis, Colwell’s (1999) claim for the strong rejection of evaluation in figurational sociology seems to me to run counter to the basic assumptions of the perspective which emphasizes that all human activities embody sets of values. It was Elias’s contention that evaluation of the sociological world “is not a simple ‘either-or’ matter but a question of degrees” (Dunning, 1992: 246). This point raises the question in relation to Colwell’s (1999) work: ‘is the explanation that feminists strongly embrace an evaluative approach and figurationists equally strongly reject evaluation a contradiction in Eliasian terms? Elias (1978) stresses that the value-orientation of sociologists and the societies they form should be examined if sociological researchers are to develop larger funds of relatively adequate or, in other words, ‘reality congruent’ knowledge (Elias, 1978; Dunning, 1999; Maguire and Young, 2002). But, in encouraging sociologists to examine their value-commitments, Elias is not claiming a need, or capacity for ‘non-evaluation’ or in Colwell’s (1999) terms a ‘strong rejection’ of evaluation.

For Elias, (1978: 153), sociologists should not be “required” or “expected” to express an opinion about how society “*ought*” to be. He asserts that sociologists should strive to free themselves from the idea that there might be any “necessary correspondence” between the social context under investigation, and their own “social beliefs, their wishes and hopes, their moral predilections or their conceptions of what is just and humane” (Elias, 1978: 153). This position does not mean that Elias’s ideas require a strong rejection of a critical evaluative approach to research. Evaluation in sociology will vary in degrees along a continuum rather than be at any single fixed and opposite position represented by the terms evaluation and non-evaluation. The sociological problem in research is to determine the continuum of evaluation and attempt to employ an appropriate degree of detachment in the evaluative process. Striving for an

appropriate involvement-detachment balance includes a capacity for reflexivity; an ability to critically examine one's own passions and personal interests throughout the research process. Involvement-detachment provides a sensitizing concept for feminist research reflecting on the role of values and the following discussion argues that working with involved-detachment provides a feminist interpretation of Elias's theory of involvement-detachment for studying gender relations, sport and exercise.

### **Involved-Detachment: A Balance of Passion and Reason in Studies of Gender and Sport**

Working with involved-detachment represents my feminist interpretation of Elias's theory of involvement-detachment. Involved-detachment is a balance signaling a feminist passion or motivation to investigate gender relations in sport from an inside perspective; a requirement to be involved, but recognizing and examining the feminist assumptions of the research endeavor and working towards an appropriate degree of detachment from those feminist values in the advancement of knowledge about gender, sport and sport-related activities. Kilminster's (2004) discussion of Elias's theory of involvement-detachment has something to add here.

In Kilminster's (2004: 31) account involvement-detachment does not represent "two separate classes of objects". Nor is the relationship a dichotomy between two mutually exclusive opposites. Nor is involvement-detachment a "zero-sum" relationship implying that "as involvement increases, so detachment decreases" Kilminster's (2004: 31). Rather, the involvement-detachment balance is conceived of as a "changing equilibria between sets of mental activities which in human relations with other humans, with objects and with self (whatever their other functions may be) have the function to involve and detach" (Elias 1956:227 cited in Kilminster, 2004: 31). Detachment is always inextricably blended with involvement. In terms of the establishment of self-perpetuating greater detachment in scientific enquiry *passion* plays a part. One of the consequences of shifts towards autonomous evaluations in any science is that researchers experience

a gradual re-involvement with feelings of pleasure and excitement, or in feminist terms passion and commitment, associated with the activity of discovery. For Kilminster (2004: 35), sociologists: “come to experience pleasure and excitement in relation to activities such as discovery in which they are habitually applying a standard of detachment and an orientation to factual research, thereby developing a very strong, emotionally reinforced commitment to the science concerned”. He uses the term “secondary involvement” to explain that “sociologists embracing greater detachment in their inquiries” take pleasure from “the comprehensive understanding made possible by the standpoint and relish its potentialities” (Kilminster, 2004: 33-34).

The sets of mental activities that characterize involvement-detachment are what Elias (1987) refers to as ‘self steering mechanisms’ and involve a dynamic tension balance between emotions and behaviours. One might think of the more involved aspects of self-steering mechanisms in feminist terms as passion or motivation or commitment. One might also think of the more detached consequences of self-steering activities as rational conduct and reason, which in feminist terms are linked to processes of reflection. From a figurational/process perspective, shifting towards detachment in research is referred to as a “detour via detachment” (Elias, 1987: 6). The aim of detour behaviour is to maximize the degree to which the findings of investigations corresponds to the objects of study and this means avoiding, as far as possible, the *encroachment* of emotional evaluations, personal fantasies and the short term interests of individuals or groups (Dunning, 1992). In the social sciences, what is required, in terms of the autonomous-heteronomous balance explained previously, is a tilting towards greater degrees of detachment or relative autonomy and this requires greater control over, and an ability to critically reflect upon strong personal values and political commitments in research.

Greater degrees and standards for self-control along with an increasing capacity for intense self-reflection characterize the civilizing processes that are central to Elias’s

work. In the sciences, the capacity for detachment is significant in the growth of human knowledge. In Mennell's (1992: 164) words:

“if it proves possible for people to observe the relations of elements in the process with a measure of detachment, relatively unimpeded by emotional fantasies and in a realistic manner, they may be able to form a symbolic representation – a ‘theory’, a ‘model’ – of their situation and, by means of actions based on that representation , change the situation”.

Mennell's (1992) comments seem to me to provide a framework for the development of feminist theories in the sociology of sport. His reference to the possibility of ‘changing situations’ resonates with a central principle of feminisms; a commitment to changing gender inequality. But, the figurational/process approach emphasizes that political action and possible social change needs to be founded upon relatively high degrees of adequate knowledge produced with an appropriate measure of involvement-detachment.

Elias was opposed to ideologically-based understandings of the sociological world because he questioned the efficacy of understandings based solely on short-term interests or the interests of particular groups. But, his emphasis on the advancement of relatively non-ideological knowledge did not discount the inclusion of political commitment. Kilminster (2004: 35) speaks of Elias's own “passionate commitment to sociology”; a commitment so strong that it may have caused some people to regard (wrongly) Elias's work as politically and ideologically biased. The point is that “passionate advocacy” and “scientific detachment” are not mutually exclusive (Kilminster, 2004: 35). Elias (1987) recognized that sociologists cannot and should not avoid their political concerns. It was his contention, with regard to sociological scientists, that their own involvement is itself one of the conditions for understanding the problems that they seek to resolve (Elias, 1987: 16). As Elias (1987: 16) puts it “in order to understand the functioning of human groups one needs to know, as it were, from the inside how human

beings experience their own and other groups, and one cannot know without active participation and involvement". This position directly corresponds with feminist principles of research. In Reinharz (1992: 263) words, the most satisfactory position for feminist researchers is one that "acknowledges the researcher's position right up front, and that does not think of objectivity and subjectivity as warring with each other, but rather serving each other". Elias's ideas about involvement should not be taken to mean that he sought to privilege an insider perspective. The theory sensitizes the researcher to problems of involvement-detachment, and the need to strive for relative high degrees of detachment. Thus, Elias (1978, 1987) encourages sociologists to conduct research in areas of their own interest and involvement. But, at the same time, he urges sociological researchers to reflect upon and challenge their personal ideals so that the findings and conclusions of research correspond to the evidence produced rather than reflect how particular theorists would wish things to be (Elias, 1978, 1987). Reflection, or reflexivity, then, is part of the involvement-detachment balance and can be thought of as detour behaviour; behaviour intended to achieve relatively high degrees of detachment. The overarching principle of figurational/process sociology; an emphasis on examining the relationships between changes in self-images and changes in social structures more broadly through accounts of long-term (historical) processes also sensitizes sociologists to the need to engage in detour behaviour.

To an extent, Elias's ideas about involvement-detachment resonate with some feminist scholars concerning what constitutes proper research. Reflecting on the nature and assumptions of the knowledge produced by feminist researchers, Ribbens and Edwards (1988: 4) state that "While we may wish to attain the status of detached and objective observer, producing 'expert' and 'superior' forms of knowledge, such claims are open to doubt". An alternative relativist position is also not advocated by such feminists. Rather Ribbens and Edwards (1988: 4) support a "perspectival view of knowledge" that recognizes that "who you are and where you are situated, does make a

difference to the knowledge produced". Exploring the theme of the position of the researcher in terms of Black women in academic settings Hill Collins (1991: 35) argues that an "outsider-within" position provides a standpoint on: "(1) Black women's self-definition and self-valuation; (2) the interlocking character of oppression; and (3) the importance of Afro-American women's culture". An outsider-within position indicates that despite being involved in academic spheres of life, Black women remain outsiders. Stressing the importance of historical perspectives and the power dynamics underpinning these insider-outsider relationships, Hill Collins (1991: 53) points out that Black women's experiences "highlight the tension experienced by any group of less powerful outsiders encountering the paradigmatic thought of a more powerful insider community".

In feminist accounts of sport, Hargreaves (1992: 166) emphasized the insider/involved position of working with "passionate-objectivity". In 2000 she highlighted the importance of objectivity. Her brief overview explains that, in her work, passionate-objectivity means that: "women's personal biographies are placed within a framework of specific social structures and historical circumstances in an effort to understand the ways in which gender relations in sport cohere with cultural, economic, ideological, political and religious patterns specific to the totality of social relations" (Hargreaves, 2000: 10). If Hargreaves (1992, 2000) is suggesting that passionate-objectivity is a balance then her ideas appear to have some overlaps with Elias's theory of involvement-detachment.

It appears that working with "passionate-objectivity" (Hargreaves, 1992: 166), or a "perspectival view of knowledge" (Ribbens and Edwards, 1988: 4), or an "outsider-within" position (Hill-Collins, 1991: 35) are not necessarily at odds with a figurational/process sociological approach. There is a possibility that such feminist positions are characterized by an involvement-detachment balance not, as yet, fully examined by feminist researchers. Elias's work may not have explored in-depth the



subjective choices of women and men. Nevertheless, through an analysis of the mechanisms by which *intentional* human action is transformed into *unintended* patterns of social life, agency and change are central to Elias's ideas. In Eliasian terms, agency is "the strategic seizure of opportunities which arise for individuals or groups, but not in the actual creation of those opportunities" (Van Krieken, 1998: 54). Opportunities for intended human action arise out of the unplanned, unintended consequences of the activities of human beings and are interconnected with long-term processes of change, power relations and balances of involvement-detachment. Elias's ideas about agency may be fruitful in helping to understand gender, sport and sport-related activities in terms of: the meaning and significance of sporting activities to women and men; the relative empowerment of women in spheres of sport and shifting and competing ideas about femininities and masculinities.

Prior to examining how working with involved-detachment has been central to developing and conducting research about females, femininities and fitness, I introduce the feminist-figurational principles of my research.

### **A Feminist-Figurational Approach to Understanding Females, Femininities and Fitness**

The specific research about females, femininities and fitness cultures is feminist on the basis of two overlapping principles: (1) it represents an examination of the status, motivations, meanings and significance of women in cultures of fitness, and the impact of their involvement in fitness activities on the construction of their sense of femininity; and (2) it is founded on an ethical commitment to producing relatively high degrees of adequate knowledge upon which practical solutions to the problematic of gender and fitness culture can be based. At the same time, the research is figurationalist blending the feminist tenets with the guiding principles of figurational/process sociology defined at the beginning of the paper in an on-going project that is concerned with: the development of contemporary cultures of fitness represented by current preoccupations with bodily well-

being and lifestyle; the structural characteristics of cultures of fitness and the consequences of those characteristics on self-conceptions of femininities amongst some women who engage in fitness activities; and the relative empowerment of women in fitness activities.

Having introduced the feminist-figurational principles of the research, I now turn to an assessment of selected aspects of the research process to illustrate that, involved-detachment is an ever-changing balance of emotional involvement with, and detachment from topics, theories and methods of research. The discussion represents both a theoretical and practical commitment to the idea that one can be a feminist and a figurational sociologist at the same time. A detailed account of the entire findings of the research is not provided. Rather, some problems of involved-detachment in specific research on females, femininities and fitness are discussed.

### **Being Involved in Fitness: Biography, Sport and Social Life**

My on-going research about females, femininities and fitness involves four interrelated questions: (1) how do female participants in fitness activities make sense of their exercise practices, rituals and techniques? (2) how do exercisers interpret and understand broader cultural images of and messages about female fitness? (3) what is the character and overall structure of fitness cultures and what are the consequences of those characteristics on self-conceptions of femininities amongst some women who engage in fitness activities? (4) in what ways are images of femininity constructed and negotiated in the context of fitness cultures? The research questions about female bodies and fitness have arisen out of my own biography and social life; by my *involvement* with fitness.

Researchers are embedded within the cultural systems of any given social group. The consequence of such involvement is that the production of knowledge will bear the mark of the interpreter's social perspective (Berger, 1972; Elias, 1978; Ward 1997). Several aspects of my biography have influenced the rationale for wishing to understand

issues of gender, femininities and fitness. A lifetime involvement in, and love of sport and exercise formed part of the basis for wanting research the experiences of women who 'work-out'. I played high level netball, a predominantly female sport played in Commonwealth countries, for several years. Maintaining the strength and stamina to perform in high-level competitions required a commitment to fitness regimes such as running, lifting weights and circuit training.

Partly because I enjoyed working-out and partly because I liked the atmosphere and fitness gains associated with exercise classes, I became a qualified fitness instructor. Instructing people in exercise practices provided financial rewards as well as maintaining my own fitness. I have participated at and taught in several fitness gyms over the years, sometimes in school and church halls, sometimes in public leisure centers and sometimes in private, more commercially orientated facilities. It became evident that women dominated the exercise classes aimed at burning fat and sculpting small, firm muscles. Yet I also observed some women working-out with weights in the gym. Like me, some of these women expressed a desire to develop muscular strength and power. It began to emerge that images of the ideal female physique were complex and that there were marked similarities and differences in the fitness experiences of women who worked-out. I was interested in understanding such complexities. It also became apparent that many of those women who 'worked-out' were not 'sporty' and opted for the exercise class or the gym because they did not want to be involved in physical competition. It appeared that counter to my own experiences, the intensely physical and competitive world of sport was not the place where women could necessarily lay claim to a feminine identity. On the other hand, such women were involved in a degree of rivalry with others, and in a battle against themselves as they strived for a type of femininity characterized by a slim and muscularly tight physique.

My initial observations formed the basis of the research questions outlined above. My personal involvement in sport and exercise, then, provided me with a

research context, an interest in, and practical knowledge about the research topic. It took me a long time to realize how my research questions and understandings of data generation and interpretation were influenced by my own cultural identity. Throughout the research the challenge has been to balance my involvement with the subject matter with an appropriate degree of distance from fitness activities, the women interviewed and observed, and from my feminist assumptions about female bodies, gender relations, sport and society which are, in part, rooted in my reality as a white, British, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied, sports woman. The difficulty faced by sociological researchers, is how to blend the roles of inquirer and participant. As Maguire and Young (2002: 16) explain, “the sociologist-as-participant” must employ the capacity to become the “sociologists-as-observer-and-interpretor”. The theory of involvement-detachment provides a sensitizing framework for blending the roles of inquirer and participant.

As previously explained, striving for an adequate involvement-detachment balance in research is referred to by figurational/process sociologists as a “detour via detachment” (Elias, 1987: 6). In practice, the research process involves multiple *detours* via detachment. In other words there are many different types and degrees of detour behaviour the purpose of which is to avoid, as far as possible, a position based on emotional evaluations and personal interests. The practicalities of detour behaviour remain difficult and complex. In practice, the theory behind being a “destroyer of myths” via detour behaviour is not without its problems (Elias, 1978: 50). As Van Krieken (1998: 81) expresses it:

“the production of de-mythologizing knowledge is itself a political exercise – myths are not merely ‘mistakes’ or even the accompaniments of earlier forms of social life, they are located within very specific relations of power and play a role within those power relations concerning ‘the *legitimate* representation of the social world”.

Van Krieken (1998: 82) also argues that Elias's focus on value-freedom and detachment does not provide an adequate insight into the "rough and tumble" of sociological enquiry, or the effect of sociological practices on social life itself. In addition, Rojek (1986: 591) argues that Elias did not provide any "guidelines", "mechanisms" or "drill" for achieving relative degrees of detachment. Some writers have discussed the practicalities of Elias's theory of involvement-detachment (Bloyce, 2004; Dunning, 1992; Maguire, 1988, 1995; Maguire and Pearton, 1986; Maguire and Young, 2002). But there is scope for further dialogue about the relationships between Elias's sociology of knowledge and feminist scholarship concerned with the sociology of science. Notwithstanding the difficulties of involvement-detachment I now provide two examples to illustrate the type of detour behaviour that characterizes my research about females, femininities and fitness.

### **Developmental Thinking and A Life History Approach to Fitness**

In outlining his "rules of procedure" for doing figurational/process sociology Dunning (1992:252) emphasizes that research which is historically located and considers wider social relations will develop greater detachment. Understanding the underlying processes that have been involved in the development of sport and sport-related activities should be at the centre of scholarly analyses of the subject (Dunning et al. 2004). Historical sociology can take various forms but for Elias (1983) a historical or developmental approach requires consideration of the long term and complex relationships between biological change and social development. One aspect of a developmental approach to understanding females, femininities and fitness involves the use of in-depth interviews founded on the principles of life-history research. These relatively formal, quite lengthy, and multiple interviews are used to understand how some women's present exercise practices, rituals and techniques are connected to their past experiences.

There is considerable debate about what constitutes life history (see for example, Hatch and Wisniewski, 1995; Faraday and Plummer, 1979). However, the fundamental principle of a life history approach is to try and capture the changing character of behaviour over time. A life-history approach embraces developmental thinking in my research because it aims to gain a time perspective on the exercise experiences of the women I interview so that I can better understand their present involvement with fitness. In Fonow and Cook's (1991: 6) terms a life history approach provides a "historical perspective on action". Taylor and Rupp (1991: 125) are critical of historical approaches that claim "the personal and emotional as irrelevant to history" and emphasize the importance of any source including oral history interviews, personal letters and diaries that enable an in-depth investigation of women's lives and consciousness.

I have spoken for relatively long periods of time with small groups of female exercisers to order to gain access to the complex cultural assumptions and categorizations within fitness culture. Instead of "surveying" the terrain of fitness the intention was to "mine it" more intensively (McCracken, 1988: 17). Those women involved in the life-history interview process have spoken, more formally about their experiences on at least two occasions and commonly in five interviews. They have talked about several themes and issues relating to fitness such as body image, health, personal training, exercise classes, media and advertising, dieting, physical education, medicine, ageing, injury, occupation and ethnicity and culture. Most of the interviews last between one and one-and-a-quarter hours. Some have been longer.

The selection of interviewees and the exact nature of the conversations raises several problems of involvement-detachment connected with self-selecting samples, the influence of gatekeepers and negotiating access to interviewees. There is no space to discuss these issues in detail. What I wish to highlight is that life history interviews help to develop greater detachment in research because they enable the researcher to identify the relationships between biological development, social change and personal

history. For example, a dominant theme to emerge from the interviews was that adolescent memories of the body, and experiences of physical activity had an effect on the inculcation of specific modes of feminine conduct, preferences over the shape and weight of the body, and tastes for particular types of physical activity. Some women's early experiences of physical activity were based on appearance related concerns and reflected stereotypical and narrow definitions of femininity. For example, Beth explained that she had "got into fitness" because it involved her in physical activity "for girly girls" unlike games such as hockey, football (soccer) and rugby that she associated with "tomboys in tracksuits with short hair". Other women provided evidence of femininity as negotiated. For example, Fiona considered herself to be "a tomboy playing football with the boys". She said she liked football because she could be "physical and tough" and because "the boys did not mind what you wore. T shirts and jeans were it". But she explained that "my Mum dismissed it. She wanted me to be a ballet dancer. I got the impression my Dad didn't think girls should play football but I still play. It's not such a big deal now. It's more accepted". Such comments illustrate that there are relationships between biological development and social change that can emerge from the personal history of women involved in sport and exercise and, thus, personal histories can help further a relatively detached view on the problematic of gender, sport and sport-related activities.

Goodson (1981: 66-67) remarks that the merits of life history are founded on the "penetration" of personal reality and making sense of wider social "process". Connecting personal histories with social histories not only locates the interviewees within wider social relations but it can also sensitize the researcher to their own values and assumptions. For example, when Neena, a 73 year old Asian woman commented: "I emigrated from Uganda in my twenties. I came to England as a wife and mother. That was my priority. I didn't try and do it all like you young women. Now I have time to relax and enjoy things like exercise", I realized that I would have to put my own feminist

assumptions and political ideals about the position of women in sport and society as one connected to opportunity, participation and empowerment to one side to fully understand the nature of fitness culture and the involvement of women of different cultural backgrounds, ages and physical capacities. A developmental approach that aims to avoid present centred analyses, then, is part of the craft of self-distancing. In addition, developmental thinking serves to avoid perceiving social life as timeless or radically changed in a postmodern sense (Maguire and Young, 2002). In this regard, understanding female involvement in fitness is not only informed by life-history interviews but also requires an examination of the long-term structured processes by which contemporary fitness cultures have developed.

### **Contemporary Fitness Culture: Long-term Processes of Change**

The quest for health and fitness has a long history in the UK. Images of and attitudes towards fitness and well-being have been influenced by the emergence of organized and competitive sport, developments in medical, sport, exercise and food sciences, the health and fitness industries, media and advertising and physical education. A range of secondary sources can inform an understanding of long-term processes of change in fitness cultures. Material based on the descriptive and empirical research of others provides secondary source evidence that can be useful in efforts to “denaturalize social phenomena” (Llobera, 1998: 73). In other words, such material can help the researcher to challenge what might appear to be essential and fixed aspects of current experiences, organizations and structures of fitness. Traditional histories of sport, health and fitness provide examples of secondary sources, but other secondary material includes official reports, the policies and strategies of fitness organizations, newspaper, magazine, television and Internet material, fitness and health manuals and dietary publications. Documented evidence can give historical insight into social life and may provide evidence that is not available in other forms. Indeed access to a range of documents may be relatively quick, easy and low cost for the researcher. However, a degree of



caution should be exercised in interpreting documented evidence. Different types of documentary evidence must be understood in relation to the context in which they have been produced and read (Hodder, 1998; Shipman, 1997). Assessment of the values connected with the production and consumption of secondary sources is important if the material is to enable the development of reality-congruent knowledge. Secondary material can be a valuable source of evidence if it is used together with other forms of evidence and if the values connected to the production and interpretation of it are understood.

The aim of examining long-term processes of change in UK cultures of fitness is to locate the personal biographies of the women I have observed and talked to within specific historical and social structures of fitness. Such investigations signify an attempt to understand the relationships between personal exercise behaviours and the social organization of fitness in the UK as processes that are continually constructed in time and space. An in-depth examination of the developmental history of fitness can help to advance knowledge about the overall status and character of fitness cultures in contemporary societies, as well developing an understanding of the biographies of women involved in fitness.

Histories of sport and other social institutions, for example, reveal that a health-fitness technology has always been part of the established ideology of sport and sport-related activity for boys and men. What is also striking, however, is the evidence that the health-fitness promoting aspect of physical activity was particularly significant in the legitimation of female exercise for women in England during the nineteenth century (Hargreaves 1994). Atkinson (1978) points out that in light of medical opposition to any type of female education, the physical education curriculum for middle class English girls was defended in the nineteenth century on the grounds of health and fitness and the development of stringent moral characteristics based on discipline and responsibility. For example, the Swedish Ling system of gymnastics, callisthenic type activities, swimming,

dancing and some games were advocated for their effect on improving posture, developing fitness in terms of strength and stamina, promoting feelings of well-being, and providing opportunities for social interaction (Atkinson 1978; Hargreaves 1994; McCrone 1988; Vertinsky 1994).

There are also histories of specific fitness organizations in the UK that offer insights into the development of theories and practices of exercise for some women (see for example Ashburner, 2005; Stack, 1988). For example, with the establishment of the Women's League of Health and Beauty in the 1930s, under the direction of Mary Bagot Stack, the Bagot Stack system of exercises began to develop. The emphasis was for women to do one exercise class a week in addition to exercising for fifteen minutes a day. The Bagot Stack system incorporated a standardized sequence of movements that were put to music. The main principle of the exercises was "Central Control, wherein a steady centre for the body is made by the lower back and abdomen being drawn strongly towards each other" (Ashburner, 2005: 129). Other tenets of the system included the importance of stretching, breathing, relaxation, mobilization and strengthening (Ashburner, 2005; Stack, 1988). The system is still employed by members of the Fitness League (formerly the Women's League of Health and Beauty) who take part in exercise classes. Further research is required to examine the precise nature of such classes and the relationship of exercise practices advocated by the Fitness League with another type of female orientated exercise known as Keep Fit that has been developed and supported by the Keep Fit Association. Arguably a fuller investigation of such relationships will shed light on developments in fitness for women in the UK from the 1930s. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the Bagot Stack principles of stretching, mobilizing, strengthening and relaxation developed from the 1930s are ones associated with exercise to music classes, such as aerobics, that are often assumed to be the result of later developments in fitness culture, specifically related to the so-called fitness boom of the 1980s. The Bagot Stack principles and practices of exercise are similar in type to

those associated with the more commercially orientated and glamorized fitness practices of aerobics that did emerge in the 1980s and could, thus, be interpreted as a forerunner of aerobics. Indeed, Bagot Stack's emphasis on fitness in terms of strengthening, and gaining control in the 'central' muscles (abdomen and lower back) also illustrates that the current preoccupation in fitness with "core stability" training (training the abdominal and lower back muscles) is not new.

These brief examples demonstrate that research, historically located within the network of long-term interdependencies does "force", the research into greater degrees of detachment (Dunning, 1992: 252). Taking a perspective that considers long-term processes of change can be blended with an approach that also focuses on more medium and short-term relationships in social life. Thus, an account of the long-term developments in fitness culture, along with an analysis of contemporary documents about fitness, and a life-history approach to understanding similarities and differences in the personal fitness histories of women has contributed further to adopting an appropriate balance of involved-detachment in the research process.

## **Conclusion**

On the basis of a claim that evaluation is "such a central, indeed integral feature of feminist accounts" in the sociology of sport and that evaluation is "equally strongly rejected in figural accounts" (Colwell, 1999: 236) argues that to be a feminist and a figurationist at the same time is "untenable". This paper provides arguments against Colwell's (1999) position with a discussion of evaluation as an ever-changing balance of involvement-detachment in feminist and figural/process research. In terms of advancing knowledge about gender in sport and sport-related activities there is a need for sociologists to examine the role of values and evaluation in the research process. Engaging with a critical evaluation of the assumptions and commitments that suffuse the sociological endeavour is not just a matter for feminist researchers but for all sociologists. One of the key principles of figural/process sociology is that:

“sociological thought moves constantly between a position of social and emotional *involvement* in the topics of study, and one of *detachment* from them” (Van Krieken, 1998: 6) and there is potential in developing a feminist interpretation of this tenet.

Figurational sociologists could draw on feminist sensibilities towards the problematic of gender to ensure a critical, reflexive examination of the masculinist, and feminist assumptions of their own work and the masculinist values of Norbert Elias. The type of reflexivity that characterizes critical examinations of the feminist research process, and identifies and assesses the shortcomings of feminist theorizing could be expanded to incorporate Elias’s (1978, 1987) position on the relationship between knowledge and values. Working with what I have defined as involved-detachment, feminist researchers could use their feminist involvements as a source of motivation and ‘insider’ knowledge, while, at the same time striving to maximize a degree of theoretical, methodological, and practical detachment. The examples of specific research about females, femininities and fitness demonstrate that locating the personal exercise biographies of both the research and female interviewees in the wider interdependencies of fitness culture is part of a recognition and understanding of the particular biases of involvement in the research process. Such research enables a shift towards a relatively detached perspective that can help further an understanding of gender, sport and exercise. In conclusion, then, there is nothing in Colwell’s (1999) arguments that leads me to doubt the potential of a feminist-figurational position for understanding gender, sport and sport-related activities.

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