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## Using Documents: a Figurational Approach

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# CHAPTER 8

## USING DOCUMENTS: A FIGURATIONAL APPROACH

**Paddy Dolan**

### INTRODUCTION

Notwithstanding significant changes in the research cultures of many social science disciplines, there remains a certain orthodoxy in the selection of qualitative methods for consumer research in particular. In this field, focus groups and depth (or qualitative) interviews reign supreme, while the use of documentary evidence is sparse. The obvious exception is the growing number of studies written by historians of consumer culture (see for example, Cohen, 2003; De Grazia, 2005; Donohue, 2006). Historians traditionally have used documents as evidence of particular events, values, ideas and practices at specific times and places. These events can then be organised into a sequence over time, thereby constituting a narrative of change. Historians, though, are *less* likely to try to build an explanatory model of change based on broader social scientific theories (there are of course exceptions, and this is a matter of degree rather than an absolute difference).

In this chapter, I discuss the analysis of documents following the concepts and theories of the sociologist Norbert Elias (for an excellent introduction, see Mennell, 1998). Elias distinguished between history and sociology, insofar as the latter discipline should seek to find the structures (or order) of social change beneath the apparent discontinuities from one historical period to the next. For example, in his study of French court society, Elias (1983: 2) notes that, while history 'throws light on particular individuals, in this case individual kings', the sociological perspective 'illuminates social positions, in this case the development of the royal position'. Elias's approach became known as figurational or process sociology, as it stresses the development of social and personality structures over time, and therefore the need to generate data in terms of

historical flows. Such changes are neither linear nor teleological, but careful analysis often reveals an unplanned order to the sequences. The emphasis on 'process' reflects the theoretical position that such apparent 'facts' as organisational structures or consumer attitudes actually have developed over time, and therefore in order to understand them, they need to be researched as flows. They cannot be isolated or frozen in time and explained outside of their temporal context. The word 'figuration' refers to 'a structure of mutually orientated and dependent people ... the network of interdependencies formed by individuals' (Elias, 2000: 482). Importantly, this network of people must also be understood as dynamic, or 'in process'. Before elaborating on this specific approach, I will briefly outline the advantages of documents as data sources in general.

## THE USE OF DOCUMENTS

Nearly all textbooks devoted to qualitative research methods discuss the use of documents as sources of data. There are numerous forms of documents that are useful to both consumer and organisational research. In particular, most organisations produce enormous volumes of text simply as part of their communication strategies and processes between different departments, functions and roles. Such written texts enable the co-ordination of interdependent tasks both within any organisation and between various organisations. So they are produced by people working together to facilitate interaction, and as a means of making requests, specifying requirements and outlining different responsibilities. Therefore, unlike interviews or focus groups, documents tend not to be generated directly by researchers themselves. They already exist! Of course, each researcher still has to make theoretically-informed decisions regarding the selection of appropriate documents. Documents are not 'objective' in the positivistic sense. Though they often exist independently of the specific researcher conducting the study, they are not independent of the people making and using the documents to facilitate their working lives. Because of this, documents must be understood in terms of their production and social purpose (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995: 165–74). Documents also have specific effects; they do not simply describe some organisational social reality, they actively shape the practices and conduct of people. Indeed, certain documents are explicitly prescriptive; they are written *in order to* change or sustain the behaviour of workers and managers (think of work manuals, rosters, timetables, rulebooks).

But, we should be careful not to imagine such documents as floating free of specific social relations (bonds between people). Ultimately, documents are written, and they are written by people for other people to read. The extent to which people follow, ignore, adapt or change such written prescriptions is an aspect of the power ratio between writers and audiences (or between managers and subordinates in the context of organisations). There is a highly influential research tradition, following the work of Michel Foucault, within the humanities and social sciences, that stresses the power of discourses – a systematic order of statements pertaining to a given topic (Hall, cited in Tonkiss, 2004: 373) – to constitute the writer or speaker. In other words, even if we identify an author of a document, the conventional forms of speaking about the topic work through the particular author. He or she has read or been taught some managerial principle or procedure before and simply recycles it in a similar way. So the actual people who read and write documents become relatively marginalised (or decentred) compared to the discourse itself, e.g., the language of human resources or customer relations. For figurational researchers, the norms, disciplines and traditions of conceiving and communicating particular issues are important but, in order to understand why and how such norms change (and they do change), we need to locate such discursive changes within the dynamic context of broader social processes. The danger of emphasising ‘discourse’ as the prime mover in organisational and consumer research is that one can imagine language as autonomous from the generations of people that have used it. Elias (1983: 187) stresses the need to bring culture (which can be seen as a system of ideas and values, similar to discourse) ‘back into contact with social development, within which alone cultural phenomena or, to use a different term, social traditions can be studied and explained’.

The list of documents that can be used for organisational and consumer research include manuals, advertisements, diaries, menus, shopping lists, websites, company reports, newspapers, magazines, memoirs, and letters (see Mason, 2002: 103). Researchers can also ask interviewees to generate their own documents by writing diaries containing details of consumption or work practices. This latter form of documents do not of course ‘already exist’, and tend to be used in conjunction with interviews and focus groups. However, because existing documents are in fact part of the functioning of organisations, they can reveal much about how organisations work. In the case of publicly-accessible documents, such as company reports or brochures, they also support the dependability of the

findings as readers of the dissertation or research study can scrutinise such documents themselves. For the novice researcher, there is little danger of expecting the data to provide the answer to the research question directly. Many dissertation supervisors and examiners have seen (in writing) the practice of students asking the interviewee to answer the overarching research question directly! This of course relegates the student researcher to the position of reporter, and there is little need to conduct any analysis of the data (the answer is already there, fully formed in the interview transcript).

From a figurational perspective, the main advantage of documents is that they relate to a particular time in the history of an organisation or society (or, indeed, any social group that has produced written materials for various purposes).

## PHILOSOPHY VERSUS SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

In the figurational consumption study briefly outlined below, there is an explicit use of historical documents. The recognition of the changing connotations of consumption and the consumer required the analysis (separating) and synthesis (connecting) of historical data. This can lead to questions often addressed by philosophers regarding the possibility of generating valid and reliable knowledge, or the difficulty of accessing reality, particularly historical reality. Elias maintains that philosophy provides a poor guide to the theoretical-empirical examination of societies. For Elias (1986: 20), 'the discovery, not the method, legitimizes research as scientific'. This is meant as a critique of standardised approaches to method, which imagine that faithful implementation will produce 'truth', irrespective of the object of investigation. Elias (1971a; 1971b; 1974; 1987) consistently argues for a sociology of knowledge perspective, rather than following particular philosophers who have not actually engaged in empirical research.

Any research method should be appropriate to the nature of the object of inquiry and cannot be posited prior to an understanding, theoretically informed, of the structure and dynamic processes immanent within such an object: 'The idea that people can discover a method or a tool of thought, independently of their conception of the subject matter about which knowledge is to be gained, is, however, a product of the philosophical imagination' (Elias, 1978: 57).

While contemporary philosophy of knowledge, or philosophical epistemology, might have developed interesting and relevant insights regarding the discovery of social scientific knowledge, it is not necessary to follow or adapt the methodological guidelines of such philosophies in order to produce such knowledge. Indeed, Kilminster (1998) argues for the displacement of philosophy as a guide to research in favour of a sociological epistemology. This, of course, could be depicted as a type of philosophical position, but such a view arguably would be untenable if philosophy as a discipline is to retain any coherent meaning or function.

Figurational research tends to prioritise the known nature of the object of investigation (for example, the practices, structures and values of the organisation or consuming social group), rather than elevate any particular method as 'superior'. What we know about such objects, of course, is inherited largely from one generation of researchers to the next. As Elias (1971a: 158-9) states:

... the knowledge which people have at any given time is derived from, and is a continuation of, a long process of knowledge acquisition of the past. It can be neither understood nor explained without reference to the structured sequence to which we refer when we speak of the 'growth of knowledge' or the 'development of knowledge' which, in turn, is part of the wider development of the societies where knowledge develops and, ultimately, of that of mankind.

The emphasis on the objects of inquiry in formulating appropriate methods may give the misleading impression that an inductive, empiricist position is being advocated. This has been a recurring criticism of Elias's work (Layder, 1986; see van Krieken, 1998). But Elias did not propose a separation of the subject and object of inquiry, nor did he follow an objectivist position familiar to positivists. According to Elias (1991: 3), 'anything that is not symbolically represented in the language of a language community is not known by its members: they cannot communicate about it with each other'. Similarly, he (1993: 125) states that "'knowledge", like "speech", presupposes a plurality of communicating people, not just an individual ... The "object" is a function of the fund of social knowledge existing at the time'. This is hardly the perspective of a naïve empiricist and Elias did not abide by the fiction of a 'neutral observation language'. Elias, and figurational researchers who follow him, use the word 'object' and 'fact' to distinguish the figurational or process approach from more speculative approaches that rely little on evidence of

social events, processes, structures and experiences. The continued use of these words also distinguishes between a symbolic representation of an event, a fact, and an explanation for such an event by connecting it to other events or processes. This is how theories are developed but, as they are constructed from the theoretically-informed observation and interpretation of events and experiences, they cannot be considered as totally separate from those very events.

The purpose of research then, 'stripped of a good many philosophical encrustations ... is to find out in what way perceived data are connected with each other' (Elias, 1987: 12). Researchers should seek a 'two-way traffic between two layers of knowledge: that of general ideas, theories or models and that of observations and perceptions of specific events' (Elias, 1987: 20). Elias's position on epistemology could be summarised as 'Forget Philosophy!', which may come as some relief to students working through Kant, Hegel and Popper. But some knowledge of 'philosophy of knowledge' questions probably remains valuable, at least while research methodology texts continue to cite them. Such knowledge also helps to recognise the distinctive nature of the figurational perspective. Before I demonstrate an application of this approach, it is necessary to briefly outline some key concepts.

## FIGURATIONAL THEORY

There are many dimensions to Elias's concepts and theories, but for the purposes of this methodological discussion, I will focus on the key aspects. Perhaps the most important feature of figurational sociology is to see apparent social structures, attitudes, values, beliefs, traditions and practices as processes. In other words, every 'thing' in the social world is treated as 'in process', simply because these 'things' have histories. They are not natural or universal in the sense that they have always existed. Rather, they gradually developed over time. Obviously, particular organisations have not always existed. They were established by particular people at a particular point in time. Perhaps less obviously, once established, they continue to change. Through the competitive dynamic between other organisations, and through various shifting relations with other groups that the organisation depends upon (for example, customers, governments, suppliers, consultants, state bodies), the owners and managers of the organisation must adapt its structures, functions, corporate culture and conduct. The organisation is not static, and then

suddenly is jolted into change until a new period of stability and equilibrium. Doubtless, most organisations have periods of accelerated change and relative calm, but change is normal. For figurational researchers, organisational change is not treated as dysfunctional or an aberration.

This brings us to the second critical factor in figurational research. Any organisation is an example of what Elias calls a figuration – a network of mutually dependent and oriented people. That means each person within this network is shaped, enabled and constrained by their relationships with everybody else, even if they are not fully aware of this. Consequently, we cannot understand and explain the beliefs and actions of any particular individual by examining them as individuals. Behaviour cannot be explained by traits or attributes that are somehow imagined to be innate properties of the individual. Even in consumption studies, we can use the concept of figuration to examine particular groups, like families, youth subcultures, spectators, social classes, ethnic groups, and gender. We can use figuration to correspond to various levels of social integration from a married couple, a housing estate, a suburb, a city, through to a nation-state and the globe itself. All of these levels are inter-related, such that changes in one level affect others. So, in order to be explained, organisational strategies, plans and actions, as well as consumer actions, beliefs, values and emotions, must be placed within a mobile network of social relations. This network consists of shifting interdependencies between numerous people, according to their roles, functions, or the kind of services, benefits and meanings they provide for each other. In more complex figurations, there are unstable power balances between people, usually organised in terms of group interests or identities, e.g., class, gender, ethnicity, generation, profession, trade.

In an organisational context, as business owners and managers become more dependent on their workers at various levels of authority within the organisation, within the context of centralising and expanding trade union formations, the power ratio between manager and worker becomes less uneven. This can lead to flatter organisational structures and more informal modes of interaction between employees at different levels (see de Swaan, 1981; Wouters, 1986; Wouters, 1990; Wouters, 1998). Elias & Dunning (1966) suggest that a football match can serve as a metaphor for relations and changes within organisations. Though the arrangement of players on a soccer pitch is far less complex than most organisations, and the rules are more agreed and codified, there are continually shifting



movements on the field of play. Each player observes and reacts to the actions of every other player, such that no player is able to implement plans or intentions perfectly. In fact, the sequence of interactions on the pitch can only be explained in the context of the changing structure and order of the game itself (or the mobile network of the players themselves). Football games are not immune from wider social pressures, and so gradually the threshold of repugnance advances so that formerly acceptable displays of violence become disgusting to spectators. Governing bodies change the rules and players learn to adjust their conduct, and to monitor their own conduct in the face of more continuous monitoring by others (of course these days, footballers are observed not just by spectators in the stadium, but by many more through television broadcasts).

This leads us to another key figurational concept – habitus. This concept has been made famous by Pierre Bourdieu (1984), but it has a much older provenance. It refers to the second nature of a person, an embodied social learning, to the extent that one's actions, feelings and thoughts appear natural or habitual (see Mennell, 2004). It is closely related to the concepts of personality and identity, but people are less conscious of acting according to a specific habitus by virtue of its taken-for-granted nature. One of Elias's main arguments is that, gradually over time, people in many European societies increasingly saw themselves as detached or isolated from others. Their sense of themselves as individuals grew relative to their group affiliation (this is a relative balance, as social allegiances do not disappear). This occurs due to the lengthening chains of interdependence between more and more people. In other words, each person nowadays depends on many others for a wider variety of needs and desires compared to those in the Middle Ages. This growing interdependency is connected to increasing functional specialisation. As each person relies on so many more for their needs, actions and purposes to be fulfilled (think of a single member of a financial institution and all the other people she must deal with to complete her tasks and duties), they must exercise increasing self-constraint and self-awareness in the context of being appraised by others who have a vested interest in their conduct. As these interdependent links deepen and expand, societies develop new standards or codes of conduct, and indeed new words and other symbols to co-ordinate activities according to such standards. In other words, cultures change through changing social interdependencies.

Elias's most famous study, *The Civilizing Process* (2000), exclusively uses documents as sources of data. As a way of identifying cultural changes,

and in particular the changes in habitus or how one conducted oneself in public settings, he examined multiple editions of etiquette texts. These prescriptive texts were written for young, minor noblemen who might aspire to enter some court society. They described the type of conduct, for example table manners, that was expected at court. By tracing the particular instructions that disappear in successive editions, Elias was able to show that these particular social standards no longer needed to be explicitly stated (though they often continue to be taught to small children). They had become 'internalised', or ingrained into the habitus. So the analysis of documents over time revealed changing expectations and conduct, changing culture, within a particular society – the court society.

The preceding discussion on the contrasts between a social and philosophical epistemology, as well as the theoretical orientation of figurational sociology, will frame the more specific procedures described below that relate to an account of the development of consumer subjectivity in Ireland. This account is summarised from broader studies (Dolan, 2005; 2009).

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The central research problem of the study concerned the connection between changing beliefs and values regarding consumption, changing conceptions of the consumer and changing social figurations within Ireland. How are consumer subjectivities (or the consuming habitus) related to figurational characteristics? My understanding of subjectivity follows an Eliasian perspective, in that it refers to the individual's capacity and compulsion to act (including communication and emotional expression) within changing bonds of social interdependence. The study is not concerned exclusively with the explanation of consumption ideals and practices, but with using these as a way of understanding processes of individualisation and identity formation, in a similar way that Elias (2000), Mennell (1996), Dunning (1999), and Hughes (2004) have used aspects of consumer culture to examine developing modes of being and relating to others.

## THE RESEARCH SITE

Ireland is a particularly interesting research site, due to its rapid industrialisation and urbanisation (concepts connoting denser social networks of more functionally differentiated people) during the 20th century. These changes include the restructuring of society from an agrarian to a post-industrial economy (Mennell, 1999), the rise and decline of the Roman Catholic Church (Inglis, 1998), the expansion of social welfare provision (Cousins, 2003), the formation of national democratic structures (Lee, 1989a), and the growing dependence on external markets and capital investment (Kennedy *et al.*, 1988). These are relative changes and do not imply complete discontinuity from earlier formations. Indeed, one of the challenges of process sociology is to illuminate both continuities and discontinuities in developing figurations.

## DATA SELECTION

Several data sources were used for this study. In order to trace the development of the meanings of the relevant dimensions of consumption, parliamentary debates were analysed, both from the upper and lower houses of the Irish national parliament – Seanad Éireann and Dáil Éireann. The relevant debates were identified through the Irish government internet search engine of the parliamentary archives website ([www.oireachtas-debates.gov.ie](http://www.oireachtas-debates.gov.ie)). The electronic form of the debates is a copy of the official public record of all parliamentary debates. The main advantage over the printed record is that debates can be searched by keywords through the electronic version. The identification of appropriate words proceeded somewhat on a trial and error basis, as it was through increasing familiarisation with the data that forms of expression relating to consumption became apparent. Words like ‘consumerism’ were rarely used by politicians, but the shifting contour of the debates can be discerned through the changing meaning and function of such phrases as ‘standard of living’, ‘way of life’, and ‘identity’ in conjunction with words related to ideals and practices of consumption such as ‘luxury’, ‘need’, ‘shopping’, ‘spending’ and new consumer objects such as ‘television’. Individual debates were selected based on the nature of the debate and its relevance to the research questions. Debates that contained significant discussions of norms and ideals of consumption practices, as well as personal accounts or stories, were considered particularly relevant.

Parliamentary debates allow for the examination of multiple voices and perspectives within a social context of dialogue, argument, consensus building as well as rhetorical support and refutation. Parliament itself, as a social arena within a nation-state democratic system encompassing an adult franchise, provides a social space for the articulation of norms, beliefs and values pertinent to the concerns and worries not just of individual politicians but also of their constituents; 'In general, deliberative assemblies are a major social institution in every society, for conducting collective reflectivity, deliberation and decision-making' (Burns & Kamali, 2003: 262). Of course, parliamentary democracies are not necessarily transparent windows on the practices and norms of the entire electorate any more than etiquette texts, depth interviews or questionnaires are perfect imitations of social conduct and opinion. But politicians themselves are human beings who have been socialised within the multilevel figuration of Irish society and thus their statements and arguments represent broader social opinion. In fact, parliamentarians within democracies are expected to represent the views of their constituents. They depend on adults resident within a designated geographic area to vote for them in order to occupy the social role of parliamentarian within a competitive structure comprising other political candidates. They, along with such candidates and the electorate, comprise a social figuration with mutual interdependencies and shifting balances of power.

To provide a social structural or figural context for changing meanings of consumption, I examined historiographic texts and census of population statistics as forms of data. There is no strict polarity between these texts, as political dialogue also provided evidence of changing figurations. Similarly, the historiographical texts contained evidence of norms and codes in particular periods. Evidence of practices and norms of consumption were also derived from government publications, such as household budget surveys and several biographical and autobiographical accounts. Thus, the various forms of data provided an interdependent support structure enabling greater verifiability. Sometimes, historians of Ireland make moral judgements on the actions of particular politicians, or assess their performance based on norms and ideals more appropriate to their own time and social position. These judgements have been disregarded, but not the events or practices to which they refer, provided contemporaneous evidence is presented, such as firsthand accounts or documents.

The Houses of the Oireachtas (Parliament) published a database of the full text of the *Official Report of the Parliamentary Debates of the Houses of the Oireachtas*, as published by the Stationery Office, on DVD in 2002 and this was used, as well as the website, to broaden the search for relevant debates between 1919 and 1980. While initially, debates were analysed in their entirety, gradually as the explanatory model developed, I was more selective in identifying key passages from debates. Thus, a dialectical process between data selection and analysis proceeded. While the selection of debates in the 1960s was relatively intensive, in that many debates were analysed, for other decades an approach more akin to postholing (see Sennett, 2002) was adopted, though selection was not done randomly or arbitrarily as debate headings often provided information indicating degree of relevance. Debates and statements were not avoided for fear of contradicting developing arguments, but rather used to refine such arguments.

## DATA ANALYSIS & SYNTHESIS

As stated above, individual debates were analysed in full initially to develop tentative themes and connections. This ensures that the meaning of parliamentary speech is not decontextualised from the flow of the speech itself, but is rather understood in a more relational manner. These were subsequently written up and then reinterpreted to identify significant themes in relation to consumption, before undergoing reinterpretation again once the time frame was broadened. In other words, there was a 'constant two-way traffic' between data and developing themes. The main themes were based on the research questions of the study, intertwined with the prominent issues emergent in the initial data analysis. The theme of consumer subjectivity was based on a more explicit research objective which required the examination of changing meanings of 'the consumer', which was derived from the way politicians talked about consumption practices and ethics. Timeframes were constructed to examine these meaning changes. Thus, the process of analysis and synthesis involved the fluid coding of relevant extracts of parliamentary speeches. The approach diverges from conventional qualitative data analysis whereby codes are established to represent homogenous data extracts that are internally uniform and externally heterogeneous in relation to other codes (Mason, 2002: 150-65). Shifts, continuities and discontinuities in the meaning of themes and their fluid interconnections were identified.

Relevant biographies and autobiographies were integrated after the data interpretation of the debates, both as supplementary documentary evidence and as a further empirical test of the developing arguments and themes.

The analysis of the historiographical texts proceeded on the theoretically-informed basis that people are bonded together by various kinds of interdependencies. The historiographical texts generally did not offer models of such interdependencies, but rather a more empirically-oriented description of past events and individuals. Consequently, the figurations had to be constructed based on the identification of broader social relationships, the functions fulfilled and positions occupied by groups and individuals comprising such relationships, and the nature and extent of interdependencies. These interdependencies were also seen in processual form. Initially, the models of figurations were based on the analysis of the main relevant texts of one of the most cited modern Irish historians, Joseph Lee (1989a; 1989b), whose books *The Modernisation of Irish Society, 1848–1918* and *Ireland, 1912–1985: Politics & Society* are treated as standard texts by other historians. Subsequently, more specialist texts on narrower time periods and narrower social activities, such as economic histories, were analysed to refine the interpretation of figurational change. Further general 20th century histories, such as Dermot Keogh's (1994) *Twentieth Century Ireland* and Diarmaid Ferriter's (2004) *The Transformation of Ireland, 1900–2000* were read as empirical tests.

The above overview probably gives the impression of a clean, smooth process, eventually leading to a clear set of conclusions. However, data analysis and synthesis rarely proceeds smoothly. As I read and re-read the parliamentary debates, certain code words or phrases were noted in the margins to represent dimensions of the dialogue. These could be related to the social attitudes, ideals or expectations expressed, examples of specific consumption practices, and also the way such attitudes and experiences were expressed. The form of expression often indicated the norms of parliamentary conduct and, thus, the expected and experienced subjectivities of politicians themselves as public speakers.

This initial coding process produced hundreds of words and phrases, and is not unlike conventional coding practices (see Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Spiggle, 1994). But the ultimate goal is to convert such minor codes into process-oriented codes. The latter codes are distinguished by their expression of changes along a particular dimension – very well-known ones include 'industrialisation', 'urbanisation' and 'individualisation'. But becoming industrialised entails many part processes. Process codes can

also not normally be represented by a specific piece of data such as a statement in parliament or an extract from an interview transcript or memoir. In some instances, the 'author' of statements referring to past events or changes may imply specific processes, but these should not be taken at face value nor treated in isolation. To do so would elevate the 'author' to the position of expert and naively accept the data as unambiguously representing reality. Figurational research can treat such statements as supporting evidence, but ultimately data emanating from different phases (times) in the overall process is required.

The minor codes that the following example were based on include 'subjects of government intervention', 'protection', 'expertise', 'personality', 'Irish way of life', 'the economy', 'tradition', 'desire', 'emulation', 'habits', 'consumer knowledge', 'controlling consumption', 'self-reflection', 'self-image', 'materialism', 'patriotism', and 'freedom'. These codes can also be labelled in terms of valence; from the perspective of the speaker, they are seen as positive or negative. It is important that the researcher refrains from such moralising (at least for the duration of the analysis and synthesis; figurational researchers can and do adopt critical approaches to specific practices, institutions and people *based* on their analyses). The list of minor codes was then compared against the theories and research questions being examined in order to identify key codes (this is of course a spiral process, as data is selected with theory and questions in mind). I selected several master themes – standard of living / luxury, subjectivity and national identity. These comprised many of the minor codes, but inevitably the researcher has to make choices in terms of which themes warrant detailed analysis. It is important that the researcher keeps thinking of how all codes at various levels within a coding hierarchy are connected. Based on one key theme at a time, quotes from debates and other sources were mapped onto several A3 pages in order to visualise the changes in meaning and valence of certain codes, words, practices and identities. Quotes were also labelled in terms of the politician's name, political party, constituency, occupation, age and any other relevant and accessible information. This multiple coding allows for the identification of patterns and contradictions, which can often be explained by other differences. For example, older politicians were less willing to embrace the new subjectivity of the self-steering consumer that advanced in the 1960s. From a figurational perspective, the most important codes refer to changes in the network of interdependencies bonding Irish people together. This often, but not necessarily, changes in accordance with time, so specific quotes and extracts must be coded according to year. In so doing, we can

also identify particular politicians who have 'changed their minds' over several years or even decades. Of course, the challenge is to interpret this change in the developing context of other changes.

In identifying long-term social processes, I then sought to represent 'oppositions' as well as less direct changes in the form of process codes. For example, the earlier parliamentary emphasis on one's duty to buy Irish or to limit one's needs recedes, while the licence to follow your own wishes in the market advances. These are not quite oppositional, as people at times still can be more collectively-oriented than self-oriented (for example, watching intercounty hurling matches or international soccer matches), but the code 'consumer individualisation' captures the process involved in the gradual, non-linear transformation in self and social expectations regarding consumption. Within such a process code, there will be 'moments' or specific years where the meaning of the consumer differs. Unlike conventional coding protocols, this does not signify a coding error, as the figurational researcher expects the meaning of identities and words to change. Any change can only be explained through other changes (normally there are many contributing processes and structural changes, so it is impossible and inadvisable to seek to locate some universal, eternal 'factor' or 'law'; as every 'thing' is moving, we must try to think processually rather than substantively).

The series of changes were then mapped again, including changes in the nature of the relationships (figurational changes) between various groups, e.g., employers and workers, Irish and foreign, men and women, clergy and lay people, young and old, landlords and tenants. Throughout the time period under study, some groups decline in power relative to others (according to Elias, power is always a relation rather than a property), and new groups may even be formed (such as the Free State). The shifting power ratios are associated with other processes like industrialisation, urbanisation, secularisation, commercialisation, mobilisation, specialisation, globalisation, monopolisation, privatisation, emigration and more specific ones like gaelicisation. The common suffix to all these words indicates their processual character; they do not refer to a practice, an event, a value, or an opinion, but to a long-term change that affects many people. Once these various processes and sets of relations are mapped visually, it becomes easier to imagine *how* they are connected.



## THE RESEARCH EXAMPLE

This research example relies on data derived from parliamentary debates in Ireland, supplemented by diaries, reports, advertisements and memoirs, in order to see the changing moral and emotional connotations of the consumer, particularly in terms of the tension between the social duty to adhere to communal standards of consumption and the proclaimed sovereign right of each individual to follow their own dispositions and predilections. Compared to the broader study, only a tiny sample of quotes can be reproduced in this chapter. The goal is to show how quotes can be used as evidence, even though here their relative paucity is admittedly less than convincing. For dissertations of course, students have ample space to provide greater empirical support and to be attendant to the exceptions and contradictions in the data. Such 'irregularities' should not be treated as 'outliers', but as opportunities to refine and elaborate their explanations.

### **The Changing Consumer**

Through the data, the identity and subjectivity of the 'consumer' was not always explicitly stated; meanings are often implicit and revealed by examining the norms and values concerning consumption. The movements in the meaning and function of the consumer do not follow a linear historical path; there are contradictory models of the ideal consumer. However, a shift in the direction from consumption as a collective and socially-regulated process towards a more self-determined process is clear. In Ireland, during the first half of the 20th century, a common social standard of consumption was emphasised. People were seen as having more or less common and constrained needs and desires. However, there is a class-specific aspect to this, in that different classes had different consumption practices, values and expectations. Politicians of a professional class habitus were also more likely to emphasise the individuality of the consumer earlier than other politicians. But generally, the individual became more centralised over that period as the subject of choice.

From the 1920s, politicians tried to impose constraints on consumption activities, justified in terms of patriotic duty. In the 1920 *Bill for the Protection of Irish Industries*,<sup>1</sup> the idea of state control was strongly endorsed: '... the protection of Irish Industries must take the form chiefly of discrimination by individual citizens in favour of Irish products'. Deputy Walsh, a trade unionist, argued that the 'Irish public were asleep

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<sup>1</sup> *Dáil Debates (DD)*, volume F column 229–31, 17 September 1920.

as regards their duty to support Irish manufacture'.<sup>2</sup> Ó Broin (1986: 7) recalls that as a child his father prohibited the purchase of foreign boots. If his mother sent him shopping to buy anything foreign, she would tell him 'not to tell [my father] where it came from' (Ó Broin, 1986: 8). So, although people were compelled to buy according to group norms, these could be evaded if one could avoid being observed. The lack of effective observation in many situations, coupled with very strict social observation and sanctions for norm transgression in others, meant that a stable, even, self-controlled habitus had less scope for development. From the perspective of analysing data, however, the theoretical meaning of these documented statements and experiences only becomes clear when compared against expectations of the consumer at a later stage of social development in Ireland. To produce a coherent narrative of change, it is often necessary for the writer to discuss these changed connotations at separated points in a research document, such as a dissertation, but the actual analytic procedure had juxtaposed these meanings (see discussion on mapping above).

Up to the 1940s, politicians emphasised self-reliance; people were expected to provide for their own needs. The pressure to meet certain needs was seen as vital in encouraging people to work. Politicians feared that some might not work at all and would thereby place extra demands on more productive citizens. According to Eamonn Coogan in 1947, 'Our attitude to these seekers of doles should be: "You will get nothing for nothing and damn little for a half penny."' <sup>3</sup> Though Coogan accepted that government should provide employment opportunities, where 'employment can be found, these people, provided they are fit, should be compelled to work'. So the ethic of self-reliance was inseparable from the felt need for strong social pressure. Coogan labelled 'work-shy gentlemen' as 'anti-social', meaning they had neglected their duty to take care of themselves and their families. In the same debate, Patrick Giles, a farmer, claimed that the nation had become 'a spoiled child', with people 'running to the shop and buying everything they need, instead of producing it'. This quote demonstrates not only a preference for more self-sufficient existence, but also an anxiety regarding the quickening pace of functional specialisation.

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<sup>2</sup> *DD*, volume F column 230, 17 September 1920

<sup>3</sup> *DD*, volume 105 column 495, 28 March 1947; see also Vivian de Valera and Patrick Giles, column 502–8

By the 1960s, the emphasis on the social regulation of consumption practices had receded, while the scope and expectation of using consumption to express and distinguish the individual self had advanced. This, echoing Elias (1991), demonstrates a shift in the we-I balance towards the latter pole (but we-identities or we-images did not disappear). People did not rapidly shift their view of themselves in their relations with others, but there was a developing expectation among politicians that people either had, or should, become more self-steering in their conduct. In 1960, McGuire lamented the continuing mentality that expected others to prescribe appropriate courses of individual action: 'Many of our citizens are not only resigned to the State guiding and controlling their destinies and activities, but they acquiesce in that state of affairs; not only that, but many demand more and more State benevolence and control.'<sup>4</sup> Others, such as Patrick Donegan, doubted the ability of the State to control the television viewing habits of the Irish people: 'Our people – patriotic and nationally-minded as they may be – will sit down at night and look and listen to the programme they prefer.'<sup>5</sup> In 1962, politicians quoted reports of the government-established Committee on Industrial Organisation, which had expressed the view that patriotism would not protect business in Ireland from free-flowing imports following accession to the European Economic Community (EEC).<sup>6</sup> The decline in socially-expected patriotic consumption went hand-in-hand with a rising consciousness of a more differentiated, self-oriented consumer. One of the subsequent Committee (1964) reports on the furniture industry warned of inadequate product standards, lack of focus on design and the fact that 'no systematic investigation of the buying public's needs or *desires* has ever been made' (p. 73, my emphasis). Though specifying 'the buying public', they meant a more differentiated subject of consumption as they stressed the need for 'narrower specialisation' (p. 81) of production.

By the 1970s, expectation that the individual could, and should, find individual expression, distinction and fulfilment through consumption practices had taken hold in political dialogue. In 1974, Justin Keating welcomed proposed consumer protection legislation as it would help in 'satisfying the needs of a more sophisticated public'.<sup>7</sup> It would also benefit

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<sup>4</sup> *Seanad Debates (SD)*, volume 52 column 123, 21 January 1960.

<sup>5</sup> Column 152.

<sup>6</sup> Norton, *DD*, volume 194 column 1818, 11 April 1962; McGilligan, *DD*, volume 195 column 408, 8 May 1962; Corish, *DD*, volume 195 column 98–9, 2 May 1962.

<sup>7</sup> *DD*, volume 272 column 94, 24 April 1974.

the retailing sector whose aim 'is to satisfy to the *highest* level the *wishes* and needs of the customers' (my emphasis). The escalating wishes of consumers and the corresponding growth in products and brands also meant the individual had no choice but to choose, and choices potentially became signs of the judgement, expertise and self-knowledge of each individual consumer. For many consumers, according to Paddy O'Toole, 'times have changed and ... consumers are now faced with a bewildering amount of products'.<sup>8</sup> The occupational or hereditary basis of social status was also assumed to be in decline as O'Toole thought many consumers were being persuaded that 'social status is measured by the frequency with which people can purchase and replace items'. Rising social pressure on each individual to find his or her own path as a consumer is also evident in O'Toole's comment that 'when a person makes what turns out to be a foolish purchase, we castigate him for being careless ... Sometimes these people are referred to as careless consumers'.

This increasing individualisation is also evident from the perspective of one person's life experiences. The memoirs of a retired schoolteacher demonstrate the unease of older people, brought up with different cultural values and social expectations, for modern conveniences; he recalls how girls used to wash their hair in rainwater without 'any medicated shampoos for greasy or dry hair or any of that nonsense' (O'Farrell, 1986: 25). Such 'nonsense' refers to the desire for product differentiation to meet greater subjective differentiation and variety.

### Figurational Shifts

While it is difficult to summarise the data that led to the identification of changing connotations and expectations of the consumer, it is more daunting to demonstrate the figurational movements in Ireland in a brief section such as this. Essentially, I argue that, over the course of the 20th century, the network of mutual dependencies between people in Ireland became more extensive and intensive. Ireland became more enmeshed in wider figurations on a global level. People were increasingly subject to a greater variety of social pressures to adjust their actions to new social relations. Each individual is not necessarily fully aware of these new pressures, but the growing complexity between more and more people generates new models of conduct that develop and gradually diffuse throughout the population. Here, I can only briefly refer to the kinds of

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<sup>8</sup> *DD*, volume 309 column 1118–20, 16 November 1978.

documents that represent or provide evidence for this growing social complexity and functional specialisation. The indicators of this change are often quantitative indices such as population statistics, so the figurational approach adopts a 'mixed methods' strategy.

An example of greater interdependencies within Ireland occurred through increasing competition between Irish farmers and those from other states such as Denmark for consumers in Britain (Lee, 1989a; Lee, 1989b). As the pace and scope of industrialisation advanced during the 19th century in England, many people in Ireland specialised in the production of specific farming products or in specific phases of those production processes. The growing interdependencies between producers and consumers across national spaces (but within the same state formation at the time) encouraged further mechanisation of farming practices, which displaced much of the rural population. These people migrated to towns, to take up growing employment opportunities in administration and distribution, or emigrated, mainly to America. According to the *Census of Population* (1926 to 1981), 51 per cent of the labour force engaged in agricultural occupations in 1926, but this had declined to 16 per cent by 1981. This urbanisation process reflects increasing social interdependencies within Ireland but, even within the agricultural sector, the demand for consistent supplies of farm produce in the face of rising international competition stimulated the growth of agricultural co-operatives. Throughout the 20th century, these amalgamated and consolidated, embedding farmers and administrators in such organisations into tighter webs of interdependence.

The proportion of people living in towns comprising over 1,500 people rose from 32 per cent to 52 percent from 1900 to 1971 (Vaughan & Fitzpatrick, 1978). The growing urban population increased pressure for employment, and violent conflict between employing and working classes occasionally occurred. Power ratios between these interdependent groups became less unequal through the growth and consolidation of trade unions and, in a related process, the growth of employer organisations. This mutually constitutive process created multi-tiered social institutions with new social functions designed to mediate between opposing classes, which pacified relationships to some extent. People became subject to greater social constraints to exercise greater self-control.

However, the continuing lack of employment opportunities meant emigration became a growing source of shame for a new nation-state. As America restricted immigration, England became the main destination for Irish emigrants. Over 12,000 people emigrated to the USA in 1920 compared to only 469 to England (Vaughan & Fitzpatrick, 1978: 265–6). Of

those born between 1936 and 1941, only 59 per cent remained in Ireland by 1961 (Rottman & O'Connell 1982: 69). This social and cultural crisis led politicians to abandon protectionist policies. Irish governments increasingly depended on foreign inward investment to provide employment, which intensified and multiplied social interdependencies between Irish people and other nationalities within a globalised system of production, exchange and consumption. While only 16 per cent of manufacturing output was exported in 1951, 64 per cent was exported in 1988 (O'Malley, 1992: 33–4). By then, foreign firms were responsible for 44 per cent of manufacturing employment and 75 per cent of manufacturing exports (O'Malley, 1992: 39).

In the course of these social changes, people had to attune their behaviour to unfamiliar social networks, depending on inadequate symbolic and emotional repertoires. The felt compulsion to watch oneself and others in these new social relationships produced tension and anxiety. Growing equalisation (without actually becoming equal) discouraged people from telling others how to behave, and so, lacking conduct models, people had to increasingly negotiate these networks as individuals. The development of the ideal of individuality was the unplanned, but ordered, outcome of figurational shifts. The increasingly individualised consumer is a version of this general individualisation trend.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

While 'historical social science' has been charged as untenable by both positivists and postmodernists alike, the principles derived from the sociology of knowledge and the adoption of a critical approach to sources offers the means to build explanations (Bryant, 2000). One criticism of Eliasian approaches, which could be applied to broadly conceived historical sociology, is that the meanings of words change over time and therefore the attribution of specific meanings by researchers is highly dubious, given their dependence on current meanings (for example, see van Krieken, 1989). However, this ignores the fact that it is precisely change that is the concern of process sociologists; fluid meanings are not ignored, but actively sought. The contemporary meaning of words can be deciphered by realising that words are simply a 'network of human sound-patterns' (Elias, 1991: 39), implying that words depend on each other for the establishment of meaning. By relating words to the interdependent context of surrounding words that

comprise speeches and statements, interpretation becomes less arbitrary. An understanding of the shifting social figurational context also allows a more refined analysis and synthesis of political statements.

While Elias avoided the designation of 'historical sociology' to his approach, as he conceived it as axiomatic that sociologists should incorporate social change into their work, Calhoun's (2003: 383) endorsement of this subdiscipline captures the reasons for the sociological use of history:

The most compelling reason for the existence of historical sociology is embarrassingly obvious (embarrassingly because so often ignored). This is the importance of studying social change. If it is remarkable that much sociology focuses on some combination of an illusory present and an even more illusory set of universal laws, it is still more remarkable that much history focuses not on crucial patterns, processes, trajectories and cases of social change but on aspects of the past divorced from their location in the course or context of social change.

In that respect, Calhoun (1998: 869) recommends a balance between explicit theory and narrative in the construction of explanations of change which approximates the position adopted here. The use and analysis of documents is indispensable in the comparison of cultures, whether consumer or organisational, over time.

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