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Chapter 7

Conclusion: Diminishing Contrasts, Increasing Varieties

Tom Gibbons and Kevin Dixon

Introduction

The main focus of this book has been to highlight the juxtaposition between the assumed equality, tolerance and unity associated with London 2012 and some key controversies that emerged before, during and after the spectacle of the Games which, instead, illustrate the many inequalities and divisions that were simultaneously apparent. As we have briefly alluded to at the end of the introduction chapter, the sociological concept of *diminishing contrasts, increasing varieties* is used in this concluding chapter to fuse together the seemingly diverse issues raised by the contributors of the five case studies presented in chapters 2-6. This concluding chapter is structured as follows: initally, we briefly explain the theoretical underpinnings and relevance of the sociological concept of *diminishing contrasts, increasing varieties*; this is followed by a review of the main arguments presented in chapters 2-6 and the identification of key areas for future research emanating from each; finally, we conclude with a summary of the main arguments presented throughout this book regarding the controversial impact of London 2012.

Diminishing contrasts, increasing varieties

'Diminishing Contrasts, Increasing Varieties' is a sociological concept originally coined by the twentieth century social theorist Norbert Elias (2000, p.382) in his pioneering tome *The Civilizing Process*.[1] The concept was later applied and extended to theorizing the globalization of modern sport by the figurational sociologist Joseph Maguire (1999) in his seminal text *Global Sport*. Elias's "figurational" or "process" sociological approach focused specifically on 'how human beings and societies interconnect and develop' (Smith 2001, p.1). More specifically, Shilling (2011, p.3) states that:

> Elias's analysis of the long-term development of humanity, and the webs of interdependence woven between people, and between individuals and the environments in which they live, stands as a prominent example of the potential of sociology to pursue many of the most important issues of our time.

Elias (1978, p.15) contends that, 'people make up webs of interdependence or figurations of many kinds, characterized by power balances of many sorts.' These "figurations" are fluid and ever changing depending on the dynamics of the relationships people form and the situational context they exist in at a particular point in time. Elias contended that since the European Middle Ages, if not before, webs of interdependency (figurations) have gradually increased in size to such an extent that today in the modern world 'millions of people may have some relationship to each other and be dependent on each other' (Elias 1978, p.100). The task for sociologists, according to Elias, is to study these figurations in order to make them more

transparent. This requires a developmental sociological approach because 'people's interdependencies change as societies become increasingly differentiated and stratified' (Elias 1978, p.134). Thus, it is important to conceive of figurations as if they are in a constant state of flux because people form interpersonal bonds with one another as well as with larger units of which they have become part (such as nation-states). Elias's (2000) *The Civilizing Process* was essentially concerned with making strong links between large-scale social processes that have occurred in Western Europe over the last millennium and visible alterations in the psychological make-up or "habitus" of individuals.[2]

Elias's (2000) civilizing process demonstrates how throughout history centripetal (unifying) forces have gradually gained prominence over centrifugal (dividing) ones, yet also how there is always resistance as well as exceptions to this. Despite what some authors such as Giulianotti (2004, p.155) have contended about Elias simply ignoring instances of *de-civilized* behaviour because they did not "fit" within the assumed course of the civilizing process, Elias (2000, p.157) himself explicitly states that the 'civilizing process does not follow a straight line', adding that on a smaller scale there are 'diverse criss-cross movements, shifts and spurts in this or that direction.'

From closer reading of Elias's later works (cf. 1991; 1996) it is also clear to observe that he was often concerned with *decivilizing* counter-trends and centrifugal or dis-integrating forces rather than centripetal or integrating forces at work in society. Elias's (1991) notion of the "drag-effect" within his essay "Changes in the We-I balance" is a clear example of this. Moreover, Mennell (1990, p.205) clearly demonstrates the theoretical significance of Elias's decivilizing processes and highlights their potential for explaining real historical examples of 'what happens

when civilizing processes go into reverse', including the Holocaust—in which Elias's own family were torn apart—as well as the collapse of the Roman Empire, the Thirty Years War and the "Wild West".

Elias (1991) emphasized a processual shift in the "we-I" balance as globalization processes advanced significantly post the 1960s. He explains that the manner in which individuals and their figurations complement one another is in a constant state of flux, and this has implications for national identity ties and other anchors of meaning being displaced in late modern life. Elias stated that (generally speaking) the balance is changing from the "we" towards the "I" as a result of globalization. Individuals in Western European states are increasingly regarding themselves as part of humanity as a whole rather than as representatives of a more particular "we" group. Yet at the same time, Elias (1991, p.209) points out that in spite of the powerful advance of globalization processes and the growing sense of independence expressed by individuals (with many emphasizing "I" over "we"); when the nation state is considered it is possible for "we-habitus" to actually strengthen. This occurs, he suggests, because people regard themselves as individual representatives of a "we group", such as an Englishman or a Welshwoman, for example. Whilst UK devolution occurred after Elias had died and the complexity of the identities that exist within the UK was not a topic Elias himself wrote about in any detail (Fletcher 1997), his concept of "changes in the we–I balance" is useful to explain how identities of many different ages and sizes conflict with one another and how national identity is challenged by global integrative forces.

Beyond homogenization and heterogenization

Drawing upon Robertson's (1992; 1995) original theoretical contributions to understanding cultural globalization, Giulianotti and Robertson (2009, p.38) explain that the "homogenization-heterogenization" debate is the 'axial problem in the sociology of globalization', and these authors go on to say that:

> Homogenization arguments generally posit that globalization is marked by growing cultural convergence at the transnational level. Conversely, heterogenization arguments contend that global processes maintain or facilitate cultural diversity or divergence.

From the homogenization perspective, globalization is viewed as a kind of mono-culture using neo-Marxist terms such as "Westernization", "Americanization", "grobalization" or "cultural imperialism" (cf. Giulianotti and Robertson 2009, pp.38-39). Proponents of this view regard globalization as a one-way process whereby dominant national cultures, and/or transnational corporations (TNCs) usually emanating from 'core' states, have effectively forced less powerful 'peripheral' states to reproduce their products or practices sometimes at the expense of their own 'national' traditions (cf. Wallerstein 1974).

Alternatively, from the heterogenization perspective, globalization is viewed as providing opportunities for interaction between different cultures throughout the world, leading to the creation of "new" or "hybrid" products, practices or even identities. For example, in relation to the global migration of individuals which has led to the "hybridization" or "creolization" of cultural identities within many nation-states, Bhabha (1990 cited in Smith 1998, p.203) states that the

great influx of ex-colonials, immigrants … and asylum seekers has eroded the bases of traditional narratives and images of a homogenous national identity, revealing their fragmented and hybrid character. Today, every collective cultural identity has become plural.

Whilst not dismissing either perspective entirely, the "Eliasian" or "figurational" approach to the study of society offers a third way of seeing. For instance, Eliasian scholar Maguire has argued that the process of globalization involves *both* homogenization and heterogenization occurring *at the same time* and this is what each of the five empirically based chapters of this book (2-6) have illustrated in relation to the "real" impact of London 2012. To re-iterate, as was mentioned previously at the end of Chapter 1, *diminishing contrasts, increasing varieties* was perhaps most clearly summarized by Maguire (1999, p.51 *emphasis added*) in the following way:

> The dynamics of global interchange are characterized *both* by tendencies towards a diminishing of contrasts, emulation, equalization and imitation, but *also* by tendencies towards increasing varieties, differentiation, individuality and distinction.

Thus, instead of being regarded as distinct aspects of globalization, homogeneity and heterogeneity (sameness and difference) are an example of what Elias termed a "double-bind" in that they can occur simultaneously through globalization processes. Therefore, Maguire argues that homogeneity and heterogeneity would be best

conceptualized as being related to one another along a continuum that is in constant flux (Maguire 2000).

In terms of the growth and development of worldwide sports organizations, in later work Maguire (2005, p.1) stated that

> the global acceptance of the rules of sport, and the establishment of international and global competitions are bound up in a series of flows that structure the interplay of sports worlds…. On first impression, sport seems to reinforce the international diminishing of contrasts, with numerous global events producing a coming together of the world – however fleeting. Nevertheless, the close affiliation between sport and national cultures also means that international sport (which even in global events is fundamentally national in nature) undermines, and will continue in the foreseeable future to undermine, more regional political integration.

Consequently, as well as displaying global unity, equality and solidarity (IOC 2013, p.11), the Olympic and Paralympic Games have often been sites for divisive behaviour on the part of athletes, spectators and others, instead, highlighting inequalities between the nation-states involved. According to Elias (1986, p.23), it was late nineteenth century 'achievement sports' that began to 'serve as symbolic representations of competition between states'. Concomitantly, he indicates that the Olympic Games epitomize the significant 'role of sports throughout the twentieth century as a status symbol of nations' (Elias 1986, p.23). Indeed, the history of the Olympic Games is littered with examples which demonstrate the interconnections between political division and sport. Moreover, whilst the Games have come to serve

as vehicles for the expression of ideologies, it is also true that the Games can be used to challenge ideological thought patterns. As Maguire (2000, p.358) suggests, whilst athletes, officials, consumers and others involved in contemporary sport are simultaneously bound up in 'unfolding globalization process, they do have the capacity to reinterpret cultural products and experiences into something distinct'.

The controversial impact of London 2012 as one of diminishing contrasts, increasing varieties

In every one of the five case studies presented in this book it was clear to see the double bind of diminishing contrasts on the one hand and increasing varieties on the other.

In Chapter 2, Braye, Dixon and Gibbons questioned the dominant portrayal of the 2012 Paralympic Games as indisputably beneficial to all disabled people in the UK beyond a sporting context. This view was prevalent at the time of the Games and continues to be presented by the DCMS, the IPC and the British media. Furthermore, this is a position that remains largely unchallenged by academics and journalists alike. Whilst the authors recognized the rapid expansion of the Paralympic movement from its humble beginnings in the 1960s and did not dispute the fact that the London 2012 event improved the participation of disabled people in sport in the UK, they criticized the dominant perception that all disabled people in UK society benefitted from the event and suggested that, in essence, the impact has been more heterogeneous. In particular, Braye et al. were able to demonstrate that alternative and much more critical views can be garnered from a group who have hitherto been largely ignored by the DCMS, the IPC and the media, namely disability activists,

many of whom were shown to disagree with the proposition that the Games had a unanimously positive impact on the everyday lives of disabled people in the UK.

Braye et al. argued that disability activists disagree with both the paternalistic attitudes of non-disabled people towards disabled people in many areas of society, including sport; and, as part of this, the assumed dependence that disabled people were claimed to have on non-disabled people. Thus, whilst the DCMS, the IPC and the media promote surface level ideas of equality by displaying disabled athletes as heroes capable of overcoming adversity and demonstrating impressive physical and cognitive skills; the authors argue that this positive outlook regarding sport does not raise or tackle any of the inherent difficulties faced by disabled people in wider areas of society or question the issues of paternalism and assumed dependence. In fact, Braye et al. suggest that the positive hype surrounding the Paralympic Games can hinder the drive for equal rights, given that any issues negatively affecting disabled people can fade into invisibility, swamped in the commotion of "politically correct" positive media coverage of Paralympic "superheroes". After all, if the London Paralympic Games is reported to have been a positive experience for all, then this can be taken as evidence to suggest that Britain embraces disability and disability issues.

Consequently, the authors explain that it is difficult to see how such simplistic public rhetoric is actually beneficial to the disability rights movement. Braye et al. do not deny that it is plausible for attitudes to change for some non-disabled people as a result of consuming the Games and its messages, but they argue that it is much less plausible for this to lead to an increase in tangible positive opportunities for disabled people in areas such as education, transport, housing, leisure and employment. Further to this, and in addition to arguments of plausibility, it is noted by the authors

that the underpinning philosophy of, for instance, the IPC's claim to "touch the heart of all people for a more equitable society", places disabled people in a passive and pathetic position that suppresses empowerment and encourages dependence. After all, and citing Voltaire (1764), the authors argue that it is not simply inequality that is the real issue, but rather, it is dependence.

In terms of future research, the authors call for investigations into understanding the impact of the Paralympic Games on the everyday lives of disabled people. They call for researchers to draw upon the often hidden and more varied views of disabled people themselves, including Paralympic and ex-Paralympic athletes who surprisingly have not been given much of a voice to date, despite their obvious experience as elite athletes and as disabled people.

In Chapter 3, Gibbons, Dixon and Braye highlighted how disputes regarding the Great Britain Olympic football team for London 2012 were strongly interconnected to British identity politics in the early twenty-first century. The chapter is based upon extracts from debates between English football fans interacting in an online discussion forum during a significant period prior to the Games (June 2008 – September 2009). Examples of support for and examples of arguments against the GB football team were abounding in the British media at the time and the study found that debates between English football fans reflected this demonstrating the simultaneous existence of feelings of integration (homogenization) and division (heterogenization). Even though they supposedly shared the same English national identity, some fans felt the GB football team unified the separate nations of the UK in a homogenous fashion and could not see a problem with the team as a "one-off" for the Olympics, so long as the unified team did not signal the end of the separate national teams of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland who have

competed in international competition since the late nineteenth century. Whereas other fans regarded the GB football team as a direct attack on their English national identity and resisted the idea, demonstrating a kind of "anti-Britishness", or what Maguire (2011) termed a "Little Englander", response to global and European integrative forces.

The future prospect of a truly representative UK football team was questioned at the end of this chapter and further research was suggested regarding whether London 2012 has united or divided people within the separate nations of the UK. Such evidence demonstrates the utility of Elias's (1991) concept of "changes in the we-I balance" as agents react to the conditions of any given time and space to either embrace interdependence (not only between the home nations, but also recognizing the interdependence of the late modern global framework which emphasizes the place of "I" before "we") or form emotive hardline views that strengthens nation state "we habitus" (as people regard themselves as individual representatives of a "we" group).

Chapter 4, by Godoy-Pressland and Griggs, questioned whether the 2012 Games lived up to their moniker as the "Women's Games" through critically analyzing photographic coverage of the event in *The Times* British national newspaper. They found that despite this popular tag line of homogenous representation of (or diminishing of contrasts between) both genders portrayed by the IOC president Jacques Rogge during London 2012, media coverage of female athletes continued to lag behind that of male athletes in quantity of photos. However, at the same time there were some signs of greater equality between coverage of men and women in terms of the location, page prominence and camera angle of photos of sportswomen compared to previous studies on the media representation of

female athletes at earlier Olympic Games. Thus both diminishing contrasts and increasing varieties were apparent.

The authors encouraged future researchers to focus on whether a gender divide still exists in daily British print media reporting on sport or whether the findings of this study are an anomaly related to the patriotic fervor surrounding "Britain's Games". The authors also advocated further research regarding the extent to which unequal representation of both genders in sports reporting is related to a more deep-seated hidden misogyny or discrimination towards women that may or may not pervade in sports media editorial rooms owing to the fact they tend to be dominated by men. For such a study the media producers would need to be under the spotlight and studies of this kind are still rare largely due to difficulties in accessing such research settings.

Chapter 5, by Jane O'Connor, critically examined Western media constructions of childhood as a universal and homogenous category through a case study analyzing British newspaper coverage of three female swimming gold medalists from London 2012 - two of which were 15 years of age and from Europe and the USA respectively, and one of which was 16 and from China. It was argued that the Chinese athlete, Ye Shiwen, was portrayed as falling outside the "normative" boundaries of childhood, femininity and ethnicity, in the eyes of British journalists and was therefore constructed as strange and "other". Thus, whilst the concepts of professional work (of any kind, including professional sport) and childhood are commonly conceived of as incongruent with one another in Western societies, the British media were inconsistent in the reporting of this juxtaposition, particularly with regard to the racial origin of child sports stars. For instance, racial stereotypes for Ye Shiwen as "robotic", "animal-like", "emotionless", "controlled", and "extremely

disciplined" (perhaps due to Western stereotypical attitudes of China as having its origins in the military and martial arts) were commonplace. Furthermore, newspaper articles directly and indirectly associated with Ye Shiwen were written (using artistic license) citing tales of enforced brutal training regimes beginning in early childhood and a history of state-led performance enhancing drug and doping programmes for Chinese athletes.

In contrast, the Western athletes were described in a much more positive light as "normal", "emotional", "family-loving", and "heroic" teenage girls with outstanding swimming abilities. O'Connor asserts that whilst the incongruence between perceptions of "normal" childhood (as a time for education, protection by parents and carers, privacy and play) and elite level sport (regimented, high pressured, disciplined work) remains plain in western discourse, it seems that Western child athletes are more accepted in this role than Eastern ones. The explanation for this, O'Connor proclaims, lies in the ways in which athletes are constructed in the newspaper reports of their achievements. It was the fascination relating to the unfamiliar upbringing and training of the Chinese athlete, along with racial stereotyping, she states, that led to the "othering" of Ye Shiwen in the British newspaper coverage of London 2012. These findings exist in stark contrast to the values of equality and unity (diminishing of contrasts) officially associated with London 2012, where, diversity and difference (heterogeneity and increased varieties) were purported to have been celebrated.

In recognition of the limitations of case study research, the author appeals for further studies on media narratives involving child sports stars in different sporting contexts. In a similar fashion to what was suggested regarding gender discrimination in editorial rooms in Chapter 4, there is scope to investigate attitudes of Western

media producers to non-Western cultures in terms of their values and practices, to see the extent of any prejudices that may exist.

The legacy of the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games was discussed in Chapter 6 by Mike McGuinness. The work assessed five of the 12 unanimously positive claims regarding the impact of the Games made by the DCMS in an evaluation report published in July 2013. By examining the evidence underlying these claims it was clear to see that there are still many inconsistencies and uncertainties regarding whether London 2012 can substantiate claims of a positive legacy. The diminishing of contrasts reported by the DCMS in terms of positive consequences of London 2012 was often at odds with real and more diverse lived experiences of individuals and groups.

For instance, where the Games were purported to have provided a substantial boost to the UK economy via the creation of jobs, evidence indicates that employment opportunities were skewed to favor the English South, at the expense of the Midlands, Northern England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. Moreover, when investigating the claim relating to increased public participation in sport across the UK because of the Games, McGuinness points out that whilst the figures used describe a positive trend for participation prior to the Games, they did not encapsulate a legacy finding in the enduring sense, post-Games. In fact, when more recent statistics (provided by Sport England) were considered, the author highlighted a fall in participation by 2013, one year on from the Olympic Games. In addition, the author pointed out that general figures provided by the DCMS often concealed the fact that there have been winners and losers in the campaign for participation. Notable winners were swimming, boxing and tennis. Notable losers included athletics, cycling, golf, squash and cricket.

Other claims, such as the impact of the Games to inspire children, also raised issues for debate. Whilst not denying the momentary effect of the Games to "inspire", McGuinness chose to focus on the strategy taken by successive governments to ensure that "momentary inspiration" can translate to "long-term legacy". He focused, most specifically on the Primary Sport Premium and highlighted concerns relating to the inconsistent and short term focus of this policy by explaining that it has the potential to suffocate any budding legacy outcome. In addition, he argued that for legacy to be achieved, the Government should concern themselves with the way that primary school teachers are trained. Currently initial teacher training does not require any physical education specialism, or in fact any knowledge of child sport whatsoever.

Likewise, on the subject of claims of improved elite sports performance, the author went beyond the impressive medal count accumulated during London 2012 to investigate the strategy for elite sport funding. He argues that the "no compromise" philosophy adopted by UK Sport (channeling funding to those with the greatest chance of succeeding) has indeed been responsible for increased medal tallies, but he insisted that there is a more sober narrative that often remains uncovered. This strategy, he argued will inevitably produces winners and losers and furthermore he pointed to recent evidence as decisions are made in relation to the resources available to take athletes to the Olympic Games in Rio 2016. Those sports that have achieved their targets are to be given equivalent or increased funding, whilst not achieving targets is likely to result in a reduction in funding. Adopting too strict an adherence to this strategy based on past performance, according to McGuinness, will develop a growing gap between sports and will fail to foster the long term development of all sports in the UK. Finally, McGuinness pointed out (as did Braye,

Dixon and Gibbons in Chapter 2) that the claim suggesting the Games have provided opportunities for disabled people to participate in society, is largely misplaced.

Overall, McGuinness concluded that it is perhaps too early to draw any firm conclusions on the success or failure of the legacy, but he insists that much can be learned from researching the discrepancy between the promises made by previous hosts and the actual benefits accrued in reality. Although not specifically stated in the conclusion of McGuinness' chapter, it is hoped that the kind of critical approach taken by the author could be used on all Government publications relating to the London 2012 legacy as time moves on.

Summary

Based upon the main findings and arguments presented in the case studies that form this book, we argue that the concept of *diminishing contrasts, increasing varieties* best summarizes the controversial impact of London 2012 in two main ways. First, it can be observed in the context of national and international relations between nations, often highlighting how international sport is used as both a divisive medium (Chapter 3) and as a means to promote a preferred or dominant way of seeing (Chapter 5). Second, we argue that in addition the divisive nature of social exclusion at a personal level (Chapters 2, 4 and 6) can contribute to and provide examples of aspirations for diminishing contrasts as individuals chase equality; and increasing varieties at the level of practice as the struggle intensifies between those

opposing exclusion and those holding onto mainstream, dominant ideological thought patterns.

It is clear from the case studies presented that not everyone has already benefited from the Games in the kind of unanimously positive sense the IOC, DCMS, IPC, British media and other agencies have purported. The result of London 2012 is that contrasts between individuals and groups have diminished and many attempts to promote equality and unity have been and will continue to be successful to some extent. Yet, at the same time, there is evidence of an increasing number of varied experiences from individuals and groups that unfortunately also highlight inequalities and division. This double-bind is the reality of the impact of international sporting competitions according to Maguire (2011) and seems set to continue. Contemporary sport has the great potential to unify people on a global scale for events such as the Olympic and Paralympic Games, yet previous Games have often reinforced rather than overcome divisions and differences persistent in wider society. Unfortunately sport seems powerless to overcome many of the more deep rooted divisions that plague humanity. The future of the Olympic and Paralympic Games is set to continue in this double-bind it seems.

Notes

[1] *The Civilizing Process* was originally published in German in 1939 as two separate volumes, *The History of Manners* and *State Formation and Civilization*. English translations of the separate volumes were not published until 1978 and 1982 respectively. Both volumes were eventually published together in English in 1994.

The revised edition (2000) of the 1994 version is the text drawn upon throughout this book.

[2] Habitus is a concept that explains how individuals subsume certain attitudes and dispositions that are influenced by history, traditions and cultures operating between specific fields. Although this term is thought to have originated in the work of Aristotle, Bourdieu (cf. 1977) is most commonly associated with its modern usage in sociology (Scott and Marshall, 2009: 299). Yet it is important to clarify that the term 'habitus' was actually used in a sociological context prior to this by Elias (1939/2000) in *The Civilizing Process*.

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