

SOCIAL STRUCTURE, SOCIALIZATION AND THE SELF: SOME HISTORICAL AND CROSS-CULTURAL REFLECTIONS.

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ABSTRACT

Norbert Elias' (1998; 2000) argument that in European societies, from the period of medieval times until the mid-20th century, the self became more individuated and self-regulation more internalized as these societies became more socially differentiated and complex is critically analyzed. His perspective is applied beyond these initial parameters to the emergent globalized world in which we now live.

RESUMO

Norbert Elias (1998; 2000) postula que, nas sociedades europeias, da Idade Média até meados do Século XX, o self se individualizou progressivamente à medida que estas sociedades se tornaram mais complexas. Este trabalho tenta aplicar esta perspectiva ao mundo contemporâneo no contexto da globalização.

It is the purpose of this paper to look at some of the relations between social structure and the self from a historical and cross-cultural perspective. At birth, any baby enters a world already socially structured and with norms and values which will, for better or worse, shape his or her personality and its social expression. It boils down to a question of cultural adaptation to the group one must live in and its environment. The individual acquires not only the knowledge and skills necessary for living in that group but also a consciousness and a concept of self. Symbolic communication is essential to these processes and they can vary across time and space. The languages spoken by hunting and gathering bands often lack the grammatical first person. These could certainly constitute examples of communitarian as opposed to individualistic cognitive systems. This, of course, in no way means that socialization is less intensive in such social groups and indeed the opposite could possibly be the case.

A common distinction made by anthropologists and cross-cultural social psychologists is between collectivistic and individualistic societies. In collectivistic societies, it has been argued, the sense of self is more interdependent with others than in individualistic societies, in which the sense of self is more independent and autonomous (cf. Triandis, 1995).

Hunting and gathering as well as agrarian societies usually rank higher on indicators of collectivism than do industrial or postindustrial ones. The most differentiated and socially complex societies are also the most individualized. This raises the issue of whether there is an evolutionary trend for consciousness and the concept of self to become more individuated as societies become more differentiated and complex.

Norbert Elias argues that this is indeed the case, at least as regards European society. In his study of changes in European society from medieval times to the mid 20th century, he found that as social functions become more and more differentiated: "more and more people must attune their conduct to that of others, the web of actions must be organized more and more strictly and accurately, if each individual action is to fulfill its social function. The individual is compelled to regulate his conduct in an increasingly differentiated, more even and stable manner" (Elias, 1998, p. 52).

212 Schooler (1998, p. 46) in an analysis of how history and social structure affected individualism in Japan, concluded that “there is substantial evidence that the level of individualism in Japan has risen in response to such socio-environmental changes as increased environmental complexity” (1998, p. 46).

Elias, in *The Civilizing Process*, presents a fascinating and penetrating analysis of how self-consciousness, inhibition, and affect modulation changed over time as Europe moved from feudalism to the present era of post-industrialism. Not only social complexity but also the centralization of state authority and its administrative apparatus were considered by Elias to be very important variables impacting on the way in which affect and its modulation change over time in response to changes in social structure. The direction of change in Europe he describes as “the process of civilization”; central to this process has been increasing control of the expression of the drives -- such as, for example, the sex drive, which: “measured in terms of the standards of the men of successive upper classes, control has grown ever stricter. The drive has been slowly but progressively suppressed from the public life of society. The reserve that must be exercised in speaking of it has also increased. And this restraint, like all others, is enforced less and less by direct physical force. It is cultivated in individuals from an early age as habitual self-restraint by the structure of social life, by the pressure of social institutions in general, and by certain executive organs of society, above all, the family (2000, p. 158). More control, restraint, and concealment of drives and impulses of all kinds becomes required, as societies become more structurally complex and differentiated and these inhibitions become “increasingly a part of the self”.

What Elias is getting at may perhaps be understood from his portrayal of affect modulation in the preceding feudal period: “a moment ago they were joking, now they mock each other, one word leads to another, and suddenly in the midst of laughter they find themselves in the fiercest feud. Much of what appears contradictory to us – the intensity of their piety, the violence of their fear of hell, their guilt feelings, the penitence, the immense outbursts of joy and gaiety, the sudden flaring and the uncontrollable force of their hatred and belligerence -- all these, like the rapid changes of mood, are in reality symptoms of one and the same structuring of the emotional life” (Elias, 2000, p. 168). The picture is one of low modulation of affect, the importance of external rather than internal constraint and reliance on fear and guilt rather than shame and embarrassment.

By “the civilizing process”, Elias (1998, p. 49), then, is essentially referring to the rationalization of human instinctual and affective life, in a sense that is reminiscent of Max Weber’s use of this term. The internalization of inhibitions charged with socio-genetic shame and embarrassment become central to the socialization process in European society, according to Elias. This occurred as Europe became more socially differentiated, complex, and politically and administratively centralized.

One way in which affects associated with the drives came to be more modulated and controlled was through the emergence of a far more clearly defined split between an intimate and public sphere, and between private and public behaviour than had existed during the feudal period. He refers to a “growing division of behaviour into what is and is not publicly permitted, the psychic structure of people is also transformed” (2000, p.160). This transformation is such that social rules of conduct become “a constituent element of...individual selves” (2000, p. 160); in other words individuals carry society within themselves and in all situations (even when alone).

From another starting point Triandis (1989; 1995) offers a somewhat different view of the impact of increasing social complexity and the relationships between an individual and his society. He distinguishes between three types of society according to their cul-

tural complexity: extremely simple societies, such as the Australian Aborigines; societies in the middle range of cultural complexity, such as the Roman or Chinese empires, and highly complex cultures such as the industrial and post-industrial societies of today. In the middle range of cultural complexity, control exercised by such entities as nuclear and extensive families, clan, city, and state is higher than in more complex modern societies. This suggests that the effects of political and administrative centralization may not always be such as to increase individualization and to lead to internal as opposed to external constraint as the predominant form of both self and social control.

As European society became increasingly differentiated and complex, a more clearly defined split between the private and public dimensions of social life occurred. Elias sees this split as facilitating the modulation of affect associated with basic human drives, and a major reason why this split developed was to make this process more manageable. However, there is also the possibility that the emergence of more sharply defined public and private domains in many highly complex societies may reflect the need and necessity to give meaning and comprehension to central life activities. Da Rosa and Lamy (1999, p. 56) have pointed out that as social complexity increases “individuals are left with a more fragmentary grasp of broader cultural patterns of meaning”. This may produce what Calhoun (1991, p. 96) has referred to as an “increasing split between everyday life and large-scale systemic integration”.

Further, as social complexity augments, participation in public space may become less rewarding in personal terms. Concerning North America, Maher (1992, p.131) remarks: “Neighbourhoods, as places to find friendship, identity, and support, have generally disappeared from the American stage and parenting is now a lonely undertaking”. More generally, the expanded and more clearly delimited private domain of social life has become more complex, differentiated, and less subject, in many respects, to external constraint.

Braithwaite (1993, p. 6) argues that Elias greatly exaggerated the extent to which affect modulation through the internalization of inhibitions charged with socio-genetic shame became democratized and that this theory “remains one of more or less unilinear evolution”. The argument that the affect structure of the upper-classes in European society diffused down to the middle and lower classes is complicated by the fact that there has been continued interpenetration of upper-class and middle class manners and morals. Equally problematic is that affect control in the United States was shaped predominantly by the middle-class. The working-class and young, working class males in particular, are not characterized by the same degree of internalization and affect control as the middle- and upper-classes (Braithwaite, 1993).

Much solid cross-national research has been conducted which has found that in both Europe and North America, working-class men value conformity and obedience (that is, external constraint) more than those from other social classes and that these values are reflected in the way in which they socialize their children; at least part of the reason that conformity and obedience are valued is that these reflect the requirements of working-class jobs, which lack the autonomy and self-direction of jobs further up the occupational scale. There is, then, a relationship between the social complexity inherent in occupations and social positions and the extent to which affect modulation is related to internalization as opposed to external constraint.

Braithwaite (1993) also points to the role of an important variable that is largely ignored by Elias – urbanization; in large cities, Braithwaite argues, a higher degree of internalization and affect modulation are required in order for them to be able to function. Both urbanization and industrialization are accompanied by increasing social differentiation

214 and both are increasingly powerful forces in global perspective. By mid-century almost two-thirds of the world's population is projected to live in urban areas and working in national economies which are becoming increasingly globally interdependent with occupational structures trending toward the industrial and postindustrial.

All of this is part of part of the larger process of modernization which is becoming worldwide. . Huntington (1996, p. 126) views the rupture of traditional bonds and social relations in societies undergoing modernization as resulting in widespread anomie and identity problems at the individual level because of individuation. In other words, as the collective dimensions of social life erode, self identity becomes more problematic, sources of social support may weaken or decline, and external constraint becomes far more circumscribed as a mechanism of social control in a highly complex and differentiated social world.

While Huntington (1996) predicts reaction and the resurgence of indigenous cultures, Berger (2002, p. 9) predicts a "cultural earthquake": All sectors of the emerging global culture enhance the independence of the individual over against tradition and collectivity. Individuation must be seen as a social and psychological process, manifested empirically in the behaviour and consciousness of people regardless of the ideas they may hold about this.

Extrapolating from Elias' (1998; 2000) argument, one dimension of the "cultural earthquake" predicted by Berger (2002) might be the outcome of the ways in which different cultures, in response to increasing structural differentiation, social complexity, and individuation, demarcate the public and private dimensions of social life and gear socialization to internalization as opposed to external constraint.

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