

Online-Archiv der Publikationen

Nr./ number	A-119
Titel/ title	The Shoe-lace Breaching Experiment
Untertitel/ subtitle	Norbert Elias as Ethnomethodologist. An almost unknown text on a breaching experiment
title & subtitle Deutsch	Das Schnürsenkel-Experiment. Norbert Elias als "Ethnomethodologe". Ein fast unbekannter Text über ein Erschütterungsexperiment
Koautor/ co-author(s)	-
Art/ category	Zeitschriftenartikel/ contribution to a journal
Jahr/ year	2007
Publikation/ published	in: <i>Figurations</i> . Newsletter of the Norbert Elias Foundation (Amsterdam/NED: Norbert Elias Stichting), issue No. 27, June 2007, pp. 4-6
weiteres/ further link	https://norbert-elias.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/27.pdf

© Ingo Mörth/ Figurations

Dieser Text ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Er kann jedoch für persönliche, nicht-kommerzielle Zwecke, insbesondere für Zwecke von Forschung, Lehre und Unterricht ("fair use"-copy), gespeichert, kopiert und ausgedruckt und zitiert werden, solange eindeutig die Urheberschaft und die Erstveröffentlichung durch die folgende Zitation kenntlich gemacht wird.

Zitation/ citation:

Mörth, Ingo: The Shoe-lace Breaching Experiment, in: *Figurations*. Newsletter of the Norbert Elias Foundation, Amsterdam/NED; issue no. 27 (June 2007), pp. 4-6;
online verfügbar über: <http://ingomoerth.at/moerthpub/Shoe-lace Breaching.pdf>

Externe Links auf diesen Text sind ausdrücklich erwünscht und bedürfen keiner gesonderten Erlaubnis. Eine Übernahme des ganzen Beitrages oder von Beitragsteilen auf einem nicht-kommerziellen web-server bedürfen der Zustimmung des Autors. Jede Vervielfältigung oder Wiedergabe, vollständig oder auszugsweise, in welcher Form auch immer, zu kommerziellen Zwecken ist ohne vorherige schriftliche Genehmigung durch den Autor und den Verlag verboten.

copyright notice

Permission to make digital or hard copies of part or all of this work for scholarly, research, educational, personal, non-commercial use is granted without fee provided that these copies are not made or distributed for profit or direct commercial advantage ("fair use"-restriction), and that copies show this notice on the first page or initial screen of a display along with the full bibliographic citation as shown above. External links to this source are welcome and need no specific consent. Any online display of part or all of this work is subject to the prior consent of the author. Any commercial use or distribution is forbidden, unless consented in writing by the author and the publisher.

Figurations

Newsletter of the Norbert Elias Foundation

■ CONTENTS

People	1
From the Norbert Elias Foundation	
<i>University of Chester Norbert Elias Prize</i>	2
<i>Book launch</i>	2
<i>Norbert Elias Ghana Artist's Stipend</i>	2
<i>Collected Works of Norbert Elias</i>	2
<i>Desperately seeking pigeons</i>	2
Looking forward to the ISA World Congress of Sociology, Göteborg, 2010	3
Involvement and Detachment: A Reflection on the Leicester conference 2006 – <i>Andrew Linklater</i>	3
The Shoe-lace Breaching Experiment – <i>Ingo Moerth</i>	4
The Impact of Elias's Work on Organisational Research and Management Development – <i>Ralph Stacey</i>	6
Review Essays	
<i>Elias, The Genesis of the Naval Profession</i> – <i>Abram de Swaan</i>	8
<i>Jack Goody, The Theft of History</i> – <i>Katie Liston</i>	10
<i>A. N. García Martínez, El proceso de la civilización</i> – <i>Sofía Gaspar</i>	12
Recent Books and Essays	13
Book Announcements	17
Bibliographical Retrospect	18
Work in Progress	18
Recent Conferences	
<i>The Art of Polyphony: Group Analysis as a Model for the Civilising of Conflicts</i>	19
<i>X Civilising Process Symposium, Brazil</i>	19
Forthcoming Conferences	
<i>Completion of Elias Gesammelte Schriften, Marbach 14–15 September, 2007</i>	20
<i>Civilising and Decivilising Processes: A Figural Approach to American Studies, Frankfurt, 22–24 November, 2007</i>	20
Obituaries	
<i>Peter Reinhart Gleichmann, 1932–2006</i>	21
<i>Anne Witz, 1952–2006</i>	23

in any of the ‘official’ bibliographies of Elias’s work (except recently in the HyperElias©WorldCatalogue). It was not included in the corresponding volume of the German *Gesammelte Schriften*. Nor has it hitherto been discussed within the German- or English-speaking academic community of scholars interested in the work of Norbert Elias. The only previous reference to (a manuscript version of) this text by Norbert Elias was made by Hermann Korte in his paper on ‘The ethnological perspective of Norbert Elias’ at the conference on ‘Norbert Elias and Anthropology’ at Metz in 2000 (see *Figurations* 14), published in French translation as ‘Le regard ethnologique de Norbert Elias’, chapter 1 in Sophie Chevalier and Jean-Marie Privat, eds, *Norbert Elias et l’anthropologie: ‘Nous sommes tous si étranges ...’* (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2004 – see *Figurations* 23). But even Korte acknowledges that he ‘was unable to find out when the text was really published’, and his citations therefore pertain to the provisional manuscript version and not to the actual published text.

I re-discovered the ‘officially’ published version of this text in January 2007, by following a different trail: the hint on the manuscript context (and also on the *Die Zeit* context) in a 1985 report by Michael Schröter,² and then digging up the published text with the help of Mrs. Andrea Beekmann, the archivist of *Die Zeit* in Hamburg.

The text testifies to Elias’s ‘professional sociological gaze’ even when he was only being a tourist, and it may be described as a *premature breaching experiment*. Harold Garfinkel, recognised as the founder of ‘ethnomethodology’, invented the term and used the method of ‘breaching experiments’: experiments in which his students breached the taken-for-granted assumptions underlying everyday situations, thereby generating consternation and embarrassment among other people present. But Garfinkel’s experiments were not widely known until after the publication in 1967 of his book *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967, especially chapter 2, ‘Studies on the routine grounds of everyday activities’), after

■ THE SHOE-LACE BREACHING EXPERIMENT: NORBERT ELIAS AS ETHNOMETHODOLOGIST

An almost unknown text on
a breaching experiment

Ingo Moerth

Johannes Kepler University, Linz,
Austria

In November 1967 a short article by Norbert Elias was published (in German) in the regular travel section of the German weekly journal *Die Zeit*.¹ It is entitled ‘*Die Geschichte mit den Schuhbändern*’ (‘The story of the shoe-laces’), and until recently it has remained rather unknown – at least in the sense that it has not been listed

which they were widely copied. But Elias's little breaching experiments, testing the reactions to his (at first accidentally and then deliberately) untied and trailing shoe-laces, were conducted in 1965–6, and in that sense they are 'premature'!

The context

After retiring as Reader at Leicester in 1962, and completing his subsequent appointment as professor at the University of Ghana at Legon near Accra in the summer of 1964 – and around the same time having been awarded the pension of the full Professor at Frankfurt that he would probably have become had it not been for the rise of Hitler – Norbert Elias obviously enjoyed his new emeritus existence and spent a considerable amount of his spare time travelling as more or less private tourist, or with 'tourism' extensions of journeys to give lectures or participate in conferences. He continued to travel and spent a considerable amount of time away from home until the last years of his life, including holidays in Greece, Morocco, the Seychelles, and East Africa. The rediscovered contribution to *Die Zeit* reflects these experiences as a leisure-time traveller and tourist – probably really relaxed travelling for the first time since he became a refugee in 1933.

In his paper, Hermann Korte gives valuable background information to this mainly 'touristic' context. Korte travelled with Norbert Elias to Greece – the Mani peninsula in the Peloponnese – in late autumn 1966, and there by accident (in the small village of Gerolimena) they met Wolfgang Boller, the then editor of the travel section of *Die Zeit*. After discussing travelling experiences at a dinner they enjoyed together in a harbour tavern, Norbert Elias agreed to write an article on the theme 'A travelling sociologist', which was afterwards completed in January 1967 (manuscript version) and finally published November 1967.

In the published *Die Zeit* text, Elias therefore refers explicitly to mainly touristic or spare-time experiences: when on holiday in Spain (Torremolinos, in the spring of 1965); while in London in 1965 to give a lecture on

'Sociology and Psychiatry'; on a private trip to Paris (probably in spring 1966); during a visiting professorship in Münster (autumn 1965 to January 1966); and on a semi-private journey to Switzerland (in the early autumn of 1966) to negotiate the re-issue of '*Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*' by the Bern publisher Francke.

On the text

Elias starts his reflections on being a 'sociologist on the move' by emphasizing the inevitability for him of taking a sociological point of view, in addition to all the 'merely' touristic perspectives, such as 'indulging in beaches, museums, ruins, landscapes' and so on. The additional perspective is provided by his 'sociological spectacles': 'I cannot help it: I am fascinated by the people, their differences, their behaviour, their way of life ...'.

The key experience took place in Torremolinos (probably in May or June 1965), when Norbert Elias strolled around the small original fishermen's village, wondering about the people's everyday life and world, and conceptually applying an exclusive *Gemeinschaft* model to their social life, distinguishing it from Tönnies's model of '*Gesellschaft*', and feeling more or less excluded from their community.

Eventually he experienced signs including him as addressee of communication, without – at the beginning – knowing the context: 'I had the impression of women shouting after me. Then a little girl approached me laughing, but hid her head, and was running back to her mother ... Finally I understood through an older girl: she pointed to my shoes, where the left shoe-laces were untied and trailing.'

By retying the loose shoe-laces, Elias had the feeling of being included in the village community – at least for a moment, and based on the community aspect of the everyday reality in the village: people took notice and nodded approval of his rectifying something that had a disturbing appearance.

After reflecting on this experience Norbert Elias started a *series of breaching experiments*, beginning *ad hoc*, and

ending in various situations in Spain, France, England, Germany, and Switzerland. He strolled around in all these contexts with *intentionally* untied and trailing shoe-laces. The results of these purposefully conducted breaching experiments are reported as follows:

(1) *Spain*: Torremolinos 1965 (upper village): In the mostly touristic context of 'upper' Torremolinos the loose shoe-laces were sometimes noticed, but never communicated, which he explained by a predominantly anonymous *Gesellschaft* context, brought about by a predominance of tourism.

(2) *England*: London 1965 (Regent Street, Bond Street): Here Elias conducted three experiments, all of which lasted three hours. He got nine reactions, mostly by older 'citizens', as Norbert Elias notes: 'In England mostly elderly gentlemen reacted by communicating with me on the danger of stumbling and falling'. This might be interpreted as an established '*society-context*', where the anonymity is overruled by engaged and experienced citizens watching the public space.

(3) *France*: Paris 1966 (Champs Elyseés, Boulevard St Michel, Montparnasse): Here Elias conducted three experiments of three hours, but with much less reaction. Only two people communicated directly with him about the visible shoe-lace problem, both sitting in street cafés on the Champs Elyseés, besides a youngster who shouted directly '*prenez garde*' ('take care') into his ear, much to the amusement of the young man's group of companions. As an explanation of this different reaction, perhaps a *different character of 'public space' in France* may be relevant: mere *observation* in contrast with engagement and direct intervention.

(4) *Germany*: for instance Münster 1965: Here the '*society-context*' mentioned above was – according to Norbert Elias – watched and communicated not by gentlemen, but mostly by *women*: 'In Germany older men only looked at me somewhat contemptuously, whereas women reacted directly and tried to "clean up" the obvious disorder, on the tram as well as elsewhere.

Here in most cases a short conversation, comprising more than the obvious “shoe-lace disorder” took place, such as a short warning about what might happen if he didn’t take care of the basic problem’.

(5) *Switzerland*: Bern 1966: Here Elias experienced the most elaborate conversation about dangers related to untied shoe-laces, including admonitions about dangers of eating grapes and using trains. He explicitly states: ‘This was probably an exception, from which no conclusion on a Swiss national character can be drawn.’

Discussion

The *Die Zeit* text is remarkable in four respects:

(1) As an anticipation of what Garfinkel was to call a ‘*breaching experiment*’, used to uncover underlying assumptions of everyday life. The breaching character of Norbert Elias’s shoe-lace experiments might be considered as rather low, but they are still among the very first examples in print of such an approach.

(2) As a contribution to and illustration of the classical ‘*community vs. society*’ problem as defined by Ferdinand Tönnies. Elias enlarges the classical dichotomy by hinting at public spaces, which can be defined as either community or society, according to participating groups and individuals.

(3) As puzzle-piece leading up to his important 1974 essay ‘Towards a Theory of Communities’, in Colin Bell and Howard Newby (eds): *The Sociology of Community* (London: Frank Cass, 1974, pp. ix-xli), emphasising the varying community-character of social spaces, measured by the respective reaction within the social space to a (mildly) breaching experiment and intervention.

(4) As methodological reflection on qualitative approaches to reality. In the manuscript version Norbert Elias writes: ‘The results of my inquiry are not really conclusive. Maybe the social world cannot be divided so sharply into communities and societies as assumed according to the needs of “orderly people”. In addition, my method

[experimenting with shoe laces] needs more testing. It makes fun, but it could be improved to meet the challenges of a really up to date scientific method’ (quoted by Korte).

The full German text of the *Die Zeit* article can be found at <http://hyperelias.jku.at/1967.htm#BM1967Ager1>, and an English translation will be included in *Essays on Sociology and the Humanities*, volume 16 of the Collected Works of Elias (Dublin: UCD Press, 2008).

Notes

1. Norbert Elias, ‘Die Geschichte mit den Schuhbändern - Soziologe auf Reisen’, *Die Zeit*, 17 November 1967, p. 55. See <http://hyperelias.jku.at/1967.htm#BM1967Ager1>. An English translation will be included in *Essays on Sociology and the Humanities*, volume 16 of the Collected Works of Elias (Dublin: UCD Press, 2008).

2. Michael Schröter, *Bestandsaufnahme der wissenschaftlichen Manuskripte von Norbert Elias*, Bochum 1985 (Abschlussbericht zum 1. Arbeitsgang des Forschungsprojektes ‘Vorbereitung einer deutschsprachigen Edition zentraler Arbeiten von Norbert Elias’, durchgeführt mit Unterstützung der Fritz Thyssen Stiftung unter der Leitung von Hermann Korte an der Fakultät für Sozialwissenschaft der Ruhr-Universität Bochum).