Making Sense of 'Ireland', Sport and Identity: The Craft of Doing Sociology

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**Making Sense of ‘Ireland’, Sport and Identity: The Craft of *Doing*
Sociology**

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Abstract

Eric Dunning influenced the development of curricula and research agendas in sociology, history, social science and sports studies, internationally, in the UK and in Ireland. Dunning was also doctoral supervisor to, and academic colleague/mentor and friend of, both authors (at Leicester, Dublin and Chester). Inspired by him, this paper reflects on the craft of sociological research. The case study is the struggle for recognition of ‘Ireland’ in international athletics and the associated painstaking ongoing archival and mixed methods research work in multiple venues, involving sporting, state and personal papers, interviews and oral history sources. Such a history of the social dynamics of charisma and shame between the so-called ‘mother country’ (Great Britain) and a restless dominion (Ireland) was by no means structureless or patternless, but ontologically interdependent with life today. Accordingly, we consider several themes: the interplay between theory and evidence, the involvement-detachment balance and exploring knowledge figurations. In line with Dunning (and Elias), the paper adopts an anticipatory motif, that is to say, the work of understanding social relations between the ‘British’ and ‘Irish’ ‘then’ and ‘now’ is not finished. This work is one step in carrying forth the baton – the stock of intergenerational knowledge – about *doing* sociology, handed to us in trust by Dunning.

Keywords: figural sociology, ‘Ireland’, Olympics, sport, statecraft, research methods

Introduction

This paper draws upon our combined experiences of conducting research using the figural sociological approach. Rather than giving a lengthy outline here of our ‘sociogenetic or (con)figural methodology’ (Dunning and Sheard, 2005:5), we prefer to show what was entailed in the process of ‘doing’ sociology as was also the case for Dunning and Sheard, in *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players* (ibid). As a sole and co-author, Dunning influenced peers in the sociology of sport such as Pierre Bourdieu, Rick Gruneau, Peter Donnelly and Alan Ingham, and others in sports history, such as Rex Thompson and Gary Boshoff (see also, Malcolm and Waddington, forthcoming). His work involved precision, systematics, scope and relevance, characteristic of figural sociology (Goudsblom, 1977) and there was also the craft that Eric modelled himself, communicated to us orally in doctoral supervision and in formative feedback. Not all who use figural sociology to study sport were so fortunate to have experienced doctoral training with him. Such matters as precision and the like were also reflective of a generational production and distribution of knowledge, thereby involving all sociologists in questions about whose knowledge counts, in what form and for whom (Elias, 1982).

Having said this, Rojek (1985, 1992) argued, fairly we think, that figural sociologists had, up to the 1990s, too little to say on the process of *doing* sociological research. Those within the figural tradition, including Dunning himself, had and have since discussed ‘method’ and ‘methodology’ and taken these in various directions (e.g. Maguire, 1988, 2013; Dunning, 1999; Bloyce, 2004; Kilminster, 2004; King, 2006; Mansfield, 2007; Liston, 2007; Baur and Ernst, 2011; Hughes, 2013; Smith and Waddington, 2014; Dolan and Connolly, 2015; Sinclair, 2016; Bogner and

Rosenthal, 2017; Evans et al, 2018; Cock, 2019). This paper draws together several strands of this work into a general discussion of sociological craft, illustrated through our ongoing research on 'Ireland', sport and identity. This research journey involves many twists and turns as will be illustrated here.

We embarked initially upon a research problem that centred on Irish Olympian, Ronnie Delany, winner of the 1956 Olympic 1500m. He was one of the first in a cohort of 'Irish milers', who achieved international status in the twentieth century. Together, they comprised an athletic migratory trail to the US that remains active today. In keeping with Dunning's advice to 'always follow the figurations', our early interest in Delany grew in scope and significance, moving from the particular to the general, that is, from sporting 'genius' to zones of prestige in international sport and from sport to the wider social milieu, particularly Irish-British relations and statecraft. Thus, our anticipatory motif that the work of doing sociology is neither complete nor ever finished had important implications for an embryonic approach to research design, with implications for contemporary discussions of longitudinal and historical research, mixed methods, cluster analysis, reflexivity and so on. Let us first outline the socio-genesis and development of our research problem and associated questions, as well as the main findings of this work to date. This is the context for understanding our discussion of the sociological craft, pertaining to involvement-detachment and the challenges of researching figural dynamics for research design, including the adequacy of evidence. In carrying forth the baton handed to us by Dunning, in this paper we intend to make the promise and vision of figural sociology more accessible to those who encounter and use it.

From a sociology of Irish athletic ‘genius’ to international sports elites and established-outsider relations

Figurational sociologists adopt a distinctive approach to the sociology of knowledge and the study of longer-term processes. In keeping with these tenets, we set out to examine Delany’s athletic career, modelled sociologically on Elias’s (1993) study of Mozart: a sociology of athletic ‘genius’ as it were. Our purpose was to connect the development of Delany as an Olympic gold medallist to his development as an Irishman. As sociologists, we expected that Delany’s genius would not function in a vacuum but we could not have anticipated the extent to which this runner was embedded in international sportive *and* political relations, featuring established-outsider power dynamics. The fact that the Irish athletic canon of Delany’s time was split made his athletic genius even more peculiar and significant. This division was our equivalent of Mozart’s court society and it soon began to speak of other matters in international sport and beyond this.

In 1956, there were three competing Irish athletic associations. Two were formally affiliated with the International Amateur Athletic Federation (IAAF) – the 26-county Amateur Athletic Union of Eire (AAUE), with whom Delany was registered, and the six-county Northern Ireland Amateur Athletic Association (NIAAA), an affiliate of the British Amateur Athletic Board. But there was also another association which retained a self-proclaimed all-island jurisdiction and had the largest membership. This was the National Athletic and Cycling Association (NACA), accepted by the IAAF in the early 1920s as the sole Irish athletic organization. The IAAF suspended this association in the mid-1930s for refusing to accept their political boundary ruling. This was a confinement of the jurisdiction of the NACA, from 32 to 26 Irish counties,

which was also brought about by political and sportive intervention from Belfast with the British Olympic Association (BOA) in the early 1930s (Liston and Maguire, under review). The Olympic Council of Ireland (OCI) subsequently boycotted the 1936 Olympics when the International Olympic Committee (IOC) also adopted the political boundary rule. No NACA athletes were therefore permitted to represent Ireland in IAAF-sanctioned competitions. Only after the AAUE was established in the late 1930s along 26-county lines, thereby accepting a mutually reinforcing political and sportive boundary on the island, did their members, such as Delany, become eligible for Olympic selection. Consequently, NACA and AAUE members clashed throughout the twentieth century. However, not all national and international sporting federations took the same view. Such diversity led to a complex and bifurcated sports governance arrangement that persists to this day (Liston, Gregg and Lowther, 2013). Let us set out in more detail the performative and symbolic subtleties that drove our initial steps in the research process.

Delany, bearing an Irish national symbol – a green three-leafed clover on a white crest – won Olympic gold for *Ireland* in the 1956 Olympics (see image one). This was athletic genius but the official scoreboard piqued our attention even more, regarding Delany but also Hewson, a British competitor (see image two).

Images 1 & 2 about here

Respectively, their scoreboard designations were EIR¹ (not IRE or IRL) and GBI (not GBR). In the Olympic parade, Delany's Irish team paraded under the banner of

Ireland (which also included the first female Irish Olympian, Maeve Kyle), and Hewson's under Great Britain and *N. Ireland* (see image three).

Image 3 about here

EIR and GBI were also used in the official IAAF programme for 1956. Could these team designations be errors or did they indicate something more about international sportive relations? Our sociological nous was especially heightened when we established that Northern Ireland (NI) was included in the official British Olympic team appellation in 1956, for the first and only time. As we came to understand, such designations were bound up in the political machinations of the British (led by Lord Burghley) in order to thwart agreements reached between the IOC and OCI. Addressing these supplementary questions required us to consider Olympic history and previous medal winners from the island of Ireland, in athletics and other sports.

Befitting processual thinking, and following these evidence trails, we were gradually drawn into more general issues pertaining to the representation of Ireland and Northern Ireland in international sport, that predated and followed Delany's win, to the juxtaposition between claimed and imposed identities and into Irish-British relations after the Anglo-Irish Treaty of the 1920s. In searching for past 'Irish' medal winners, we discovered the hitherto unknown involvement of an all-island athletic team, selected by the NACA to compete in the inaugural British Empire Games of 1930, which included an Irish medal winner, Bill Britton (Liston and Maguire, 2016). The formerly closed world of international sport governance was also revealed. A

two-way process between theory and research design facilitated our approach to an evolving research problem.

Forced to revise our research problem and design in light of these discoveries, we reformulated our questions concerning athletic genius and reoriented our work around three main empirical questions: Who was represented in twentieth-century national and international sport and for what purposes? Who was attracted to this representation and why (not)? And how were identities imposed or embraced? By positioning sport within the wider social milieu, we then moved to consider any connections between the Olympic movement and a longer-term Irish quest for exciting political, diplomatic and international significance (Maguire, 1991). As with *Barbarians*, we sought to apply light coats of theoretical paint to guard against the dangers of cultural bias. We did not think that available or newly uncovered evidence could simply speak for itself. That work on relations of dominance-subordination was of potential relevance became more and more evident as we pursued a longer-term comparative perspective, both in the extant historical and twentieth century literature, in work on global sport and international relations (Maguire, 1999, 2005), and on sport and identity in Ireland, especially the ‘frozen clinch’ in Northern Ireland (Liston and Deighan, 2021 forthcoming). In doing this, we sought and were able to connect developments in the westernmost European island, ‘Ireland’, to imperial and international social relations and processes (e.g. Inglis, 2007; Carroll, 2016; McGee, 2020), including the identification of non-state diplomats (sportcraft) and cultural intermediaries. Let us briefly preview the main findings and the conceptual insights that were achieved, still ongoing.

Research Context, Conceptual Insights and Adequacy of Evidence

Following the empirical data took our research problem towards the nexus of sportcraft and statecraft and to the role of Irish sports officials. In turn, the search for new findings was informed by further theoretical reflection. Irish sporting officials came to be seen as cultural intermediaries working at the intersection of culture and politics, providing meaning and challenging legitimacy. Their relatively autonomous practices, knowledge and attitudes framed the expansion of the Olympic movement in Ireland but also differed by degrees from the tastes of international athletic and Olympic elites. This autonomy stemmed in part from the position of sport in general in civic society – formal Irish state policy on sport was absent throughout the first half of the twentieth century – but also the composition of the OCI executive. This group was part of the cultural elite of Irish society, some with direct links to the nationalist struggle for independence. Their actions were part of the wider effort for a distinct identity, recognition, jurisdiction and international status. Of the OCI Presidents most implicated here were JJ Keane (1922-1929, also IOC executive member from 1922-1951), Colonel Eamon ‘Ned’ Broy (President 1933-1950, *Garda* Commissioner) and Lord Killanin (President 1950-1973, IOC executive member 1952-1972, IOC President 1972-80). General Secretaries and Treasurers of the OCI, some with legal and military backgrounds, also played their part.

What has come to be referred to as ‘big history’ we see as ‘big sociology’, which began to take shape. For us, ‘big sociology’ addresses longstanding social and scientific issues, involves technical and social knowledge of the natural and human worlds, and an understanding of the developmental architecture of knowledge. The dynamics underpinning longer-term aspects of global sport were reflected in group

relations, at community and national levels, and in the zones of prestige, emulation and resistance that accompanied them, notably the Olympic movement and the blue riband sport of (track and field) athletics. The IOC and IAAF executives of the time were closed centres, often with overlapping membership, comprised entirely of men, where cultural activities valued by elite groups were produced, displayed and consumed. Access to these IAAF and IOC zones was closely regulated, thereby reproducing cultural and symbolic capital for those with influence over international sport. Yet if we had looked at these men from a sufficiently high level of abstraction, they and their associations/federations could all appear alike. Similarly, had we chosen a very low level of abstraction, the differences between them could have been so numerous and individual that any pattern was lost in a mass of details. Our appraisal then was not a simple matter of either-or but a question of degrees of scientificity (the application of methods and principles). Dunning grasped this false dichotomy between high and low levels of abstraction/generalization (Rojek, 2004), and subsequently conveyed to us his insights into this and other conceptual dichotomies.

It became apparent that Swede Sigfrid Edström was a central power broker: the first President of the IAAF (1912-1946), and (overlapping) holder of the IOC equivalent role (1942-1952). Burghley was regarded by the IAAF elites as an acceptable Presidential successor. He was also considered for IOC President, a role given instead by secret ballot to American Avery Brundage, who served from 1952 to 1972. Brundage was a former Olympian (as was Burghley), successful businessman and President of the American Olympic committee (1929-1953), IOC Vice-President

(1945-1952) and, as we came to discover, had direct involvement in the ‘Irish question’ for at least 20 years.

In Britain, Burghley was President of the Amateur Athletic Association (AAA), the longest serving Chair of the BOA, an Olympic medallist, peer and Conservative politician, lauded for his leadership of the 1948 London Olympics. By the early 1950s he was a trusted link between the IOC and the British government (Jeffreys, 2014). Billy Holt, Director of the 1948 London Organizing Committee was technical advisor to the 1956 organizing committee, and IAAF honorary secretary from 1946-1952. Don Pain MBE (1952-1969) and Fred Holder OBE (1969-76) followed him in this role (all three attached to South London Harriers). This meant that for 30 consecutive years, AAA officers held the two key influential IAAF roles. With three British members in the IOC, one always on the executive after 1931, British influence in the Olympic and international athletics movement was considerable, particularly during and after the Second World War. It was during this time that the IAAF imposed their political boundary rule, approved the NIAAA’s right to govern athletics in the six counties as well as its affiliation with the AAA, and suspended the NACA for their refusal to accept this ruling.

In the context of Irish-British sportive relations, the established group were the British, and the English, *men* especially, were established insiders. Like Burghley/Marquess of Exeter, these usually had an Oxbridge or public school education and/or aristocratic heritage. Others too, such as Lords Desborough and Aberdare, Billy Holt OBE, Sir Harold Abrahams (barrister) and Philip Noel Baker (politician, diplomat and Nobel Peace Prize winner), were all prominent in British-

English figurations of amateur sport and civic and/or political life, nationally and internationally. The accumulation of capital in its economic, symbolic and cultural forms was expressed in several areas of life, including education, occupation, political influence, wealth, income, status and prestige. Not only did the 'British' have social cohesion and a set of integrated social networks, but also greater power resources, for example, in strategies designed to maintain, impose or co-op cultures and practices, more control over flows of communication and a particular ideological construction of the relative status and worth of 'their' colonies and dominions. Included in this was their influence in the IOC and IAAF.

The outsider was 'Ireland', a British colony, restless dominion and then independent, but separated politically, into a reverse majority/minority north and south, comprised of two main ethno-religious groupings – Protestant Unionists and Catholic Nationalists. Protestant Unionists were an established insider group upon the formation of NI but an outsider group within the newly formed Irish state. Some within 'Irish' groups took on, under certain conditions, some (but not all) of the values of the established group, such as the aforementioned Killanin. He was incoming OCI President in 1950, a Cambridge graduate of Anglo-Irish heritage, accepted by Burghley for IOC executive membership as 'one of us' because of this background and his family peerage. In Burghley's own words, Killanin had 'just the right background' and did not portray 'the incurably parochial outlook of the (Irish) people' (Burghley to Edström, 11 October 1951, IOC Archives, Marked Private and Personal). Killanin was acceptable to the OCI because he was removed from internal hostilities between the NACA and AAUE. He proved to be an astute choice by the OCI because he did not 'let sleeping dogs lie' as Burghley had hoped (ibid) and he

came to subvert the social order concerning the ‘Irish question’ in the international Olympic movement. Following discreet conversations, private correspondence with, and official lobbying of Brundage, Killanin influenced the reinstatement of the team title Ireland, subsequently attributed by the IOC to Delany’s team. This contrasted with the IAAF’s retention of Eire/EIR until the 1980s. Yet the development of Killanin’s social position within the structure of the Olympic movement – as a titled peer, Cambridge graduate, Brigade Major in World War Two, journalist, businessman and *Irishman* – cannot be adequately understood without reference to a sociological model: in this case of Irish-British relations. The same might be said of Burghley and of others.

As these degrees of scientificity began to strengthen and our sociological understanding began to grow, we explored the probability that this was in fact a study beyond the confines of sport, that is, of the political jurisdiction between Irish and British associations, comprising sportcraft *and* statecraft. More hints, allusions and references emerged. Evidence of cultural and political rivalries, enmities and hostilities surfaced. This required us to keep our relative involvement from clouding the analytical view, especially, being Irish in identity terms, were we ever ‘too pleased’ to discover that ‘perfidious Albion’ or ‘a British gentleman’ (as described by Delany) had been working behind the scenes to thwart Irish claims. We were also gratified as researchers to locate the hitherto hidden or ignored voices of outsiders, as well as confirmatory evidence of latent anti-Irish sentiments at the top echelons of British power, and of how the IOC/IAAF were also under the sway of the makers of modern sport and their political master. Concomitantly, we discovered that what was

also at work was an illustration of the making of modernity and international relations in the context of global sport.

A ‘Great Game’ of Irish-British sportive relations emerged, which was connected to the shared histories of these islands, lasting more than 800 years. A key battleground in the quest for dominance, symbolic and exciting significance was, and with no little irony, the Olympic movement of the twentieth century. Ireland was absorbed into this game via its acceptance as an all-island organization into the Olympic movement in 1922. This Game – a phrase immortalized by Kipling’s 1901 novel *Kim* – was one in which the established power within the (waning) Empire sought influence, control and strategic access. It involved established Olympic elites and those who aspired to be so, who through their beliefs and actions sought to increase their appeal, power and scope.

The sources consulted by us to date include government papers in Belfast, Dublin, London, Melbourne, Canberra and Ottawa. Combined with this, we explored local and national sporting archives in Dublin, Armagh, Belfast, London, Birmingham, Ottawa and Lausanne. Newspaper archives in the UK, Australia, Canada and Ireland were also accessed, including regional newspapers with greater variation and localised information, as were any available private papers/personal correspondence of powerful individuals in the global sports medical industrial complex. Still and film footage, photographs and interviews, with family descendants who generated insights into inherited stories, reinforced other data sources. In providing this list, it may appear that our research journey was governed by a smooth linear logic of exploration and a process that was predictable and well signposted in advance. This was not the

case, yet neither was it haphazard. Our research plan had three guiding principles: there was likely to be nothing as practical as a good theory (Lewin, 1934) – substantive or formal; a recognition of the potential benefits of a multisource strategy, because following the evidence trail we suspected (rightly) that the stories of Delany, Hewson and others did not involve sport alone; and being open to unexpected outcomes. In retrospect, we now know much more about the twists and turns of this process, and the journey that had to be undertaken. This was a function both of discovery and the timescale required to pursue increasingly complex and wide ranging research avenues.

Had we been satisfied merely with a deeper insight into Delany's gold medal alone, we would not have discovered the opportunity to uncover and debunk myths concerning 'Ireland' and the interwar British Empire Games of 1930, 1934 and 1938 (Liston and Maguire, under review), and we would surely not have exposed the longer-term quest for exciting significance at play, involving the struggle for recognition, jurisdiction and identity within Ireland and between the Irish and British. Let us now examine this research craft and Dunning's impact on it along the lines of the involvement-detachment balance and the interplay between theory and evidence.

Irish-British relations and involvement-detachment

Sociologically speaking, all linguistic descriptors in everyday parlance are shaped by the context from which they emerged. The term Anglo-Irish relations was applied originally, in cultural and identity terms, to Church of Ireland members who comprised the professional and landed classes in Ireland from the seventeenth to early twentieth centuries, and who replaced Gaelic Irish and Old Norman/English

aristocracies as the ruling class.² This descriptor was affirmed politically in the Government of Ireland Act of 1920 and the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, which established the twenty-six counties of the dominion of Ireland (which became commonly known as ‘the South’). Of the nine counties of Ulster, six became part of Northern Ireland (‘the North’). From the outset then, it was perceptible that the term Anglo-Irish was the dominant and accepted descriptor. Other geographical terms – the British Isles/Western Isles/North Atlantic Isles (taken to include Ireland) – also were evident but the reverse descriptor, Irish-British, was much less used, if at all. This guided our decision to distance ourselves from established usage of descriptors and stereotypes that were laced with charisma and disgrace, such as ‘the troublesome Irish’ and ‘perfidious Albion’. Expressions of emotion were common too in the sources we examined, seen in claims of ‘wounding ... susceptibilities’, ‘change(s) of heart’, ‘a quarrel largely personal’, raising ‘a hornet’s nest’, ‘deep feelings of resentment and disappointment’, ‘sordid interests’, ‘the incurably parochial outlook of the people over there’, and the perceived legacy of Oliver Cromwell for the Irish national character. Our chosen descriptor of Irish-British relations was also a means of counterbalancing the dominant perspective of established sporting elites, in the IOC and IAAF executives.

The established group in Irish-British relations – the British-English – have over the course of centuries been connected by a dense social and political network, within which waves of praise-gossip about themselves and blame-gossip (including ignorance) about Ireland and the ‘Irish’ have been passed. Since at least the 1600s, issues have arisen from a shared and troubled history between Ireland and Britain. Identities were chiselled out of this history – involving sharp edges, blurred

allegiances and conflicting loyalties. A whole constellation of symptoms typically associated with social oppression, exploitation, national/ethnic differences and established-outsider dynamics was thus detectable.

Our own identities are sculpted out of this shared history and indeed inevitably bound up in the tapestry of relations on these islands. Included in this too was Dunning (born into a working-class family in Hayes, London, who contributed much to sociology and sport at University College Dublin, Ireland, and Ulster University, Northern Ireland), and Elias, who came to live in England having fled Nazi Germany.³ Maguire is the son of a soldier in the Irish Free State army, whose family history stretches to the War of Independence. Yet, growing up in England as a first generation outsider, and subsequently ostracized as an Irish Catholic boy growing up during the Provisional IRA campaigns of the 1970s, brought its own challenges. His academic work has focused on questions of identity within the UK and the Empire as a whole. Such work is both a reflection and an indication of the revival of Celtic culture and the study of the Empire more broadly. Liston was born in rural Ireland (Munster/the ‘South’), has lived and worked in Dublin, northwest England and is now domiciled in Belfast (Ulster/‘the North’). Like Maguire, she too has experience of being an Irish person ‘abroad’. She has represented Ireland (all-island) and the Republic of Ireland (26 counties) in international sport, having also been invited to represent Ireland aged 17 in European junior athletics. She has first-hand experience of jurisdictional and social justice issues and of identity politics on the island. Her academic work has also focused on questions of identity, be they of a gendered, sporting or national dimension, particularly as they relate to power relations and the relationship between the ‘individual’ and society. Family histories (including the significant loss of close

family members over the duration of this work), gender identities, age differentials, schooling, language and geographical space issues governed our sensitivities, but were combined with a particular balance of involvement-detachment.

From the outside looking in, we sought to understand, and from the inside looking out, we sought to explain. Three strategies enabled us to strike this involvement-detachment balance: the use of multiple sources and research sites, the application of the personal pronoun model of I/we/they images and the adoption of a longer-term perspective. Relative detachment enhanced our capacity to stand back to ascertain the various tensions within Ireland (notably the perspectives of those who were nationalist or unionist by degrees) and combine this with the necessary and unavoidable involvement in what we studied, in a *verstehen* sense. Not only were we pleased to reveal hidden voices and hands of power but we were also absorbed by those British-English officials (in sports such as boxing, for example) who did not behave in line with the public position taken by BOA and AAA elites towards 'Ireland'. At each step, a range of challenges, dilemmas and choices arose.

Following these figurational trails, we traversed back in time and discovered the largely undeclared and decidedly undiplomatic involvement of athletes from 'Ireland' in the inaugural British Empire Games (BEG), held in Hamilton, Ontario in 1930 (Liston and Maguire, 2016). Moving forward from this, we then revealed the role of non-state sportive diplomats and cultural intermediaries in Irish Olympic sport (athletics, cycling, boxing and swimming) before and after World War Two. At a crossroads in a fluid opaque research process and to confirm what we felt was potentially important, we debated and searched the extant sociological literature.

Historical narratives were available but these did not align with the potential breadth of what we were uncovering about wider developments that connected statecraft and ‘sportcraft’. Examples of this original breadth included the hitherto unknown intervention of the Irish *Taoiseach* in lobbying British Foreign Office representative, Philip Noel Baker, about the team designation in advance of the 1948 London Olympics (Liston and Maguire, under review); the ways in which Irish Olympic officials (who were also prominent members of the Irish army, War Ministry and/or police/*Garda Síochána*) contested IOC, IAAF, BOA and AAA interpretations of nation before and after World War Two, and the personal intervention of NI Prime Minister Lord Craigavon in the question of athletic jurisdiction in 1930 (ibid). The latter ensured that the growth in self-image of the NIAAA was cemented in the awarding of British affiliate status. Under-resourced and not knowing what we now know, we pressed on with this figurational quest, towards Commonwealth sources in Canada and Australia, which cemented an inter-war British imperial research trail.

In the uncovered sources related to the BEG was a case study that could lay claim to *Mythenjäger* status, or what Berger (1963) referred to as the ‘debunking motif.’ This related to the participation of an all-Ireland team in an imperial sports and cultural event. Identity politics began to come to life when we uncovered Britton, the aforementioned Irish BEG medal winner, who had also represented the British Empire in invitational meets some years prior. Although we felt we were on to ‘something’ about questions of power, identity and control, we started to run into real world research problems: evidence was often difficult to locate, recatalogued and, in some cases, had been destroyed. Some older records were not retained following the relocation of the offices of sports governing bodies while yet others were damaged in

basement floods. In fact, presently, some international sports organizations are no longer retaining historical documentation, owing to bureaucratic, financial and storage requirements, but also for political expediency.

Many times fragments of data perplexed us. We were persuaded of the relevance of guiding concepts but we actively debated whether we were putting our established-outsider horse before the cart. Gradually, however, the accumulation of evidence – including personal correspondence buried in archives and BEG memorabilia held in family collections, together with cross referencing to other sources – convinced us that our incipient theorising on these questions of power, identity and control had sociological merit. There was an ostensibly *English question* of how to recognize those in NI who held greater affiliation to GB in sport; a *British question* concerning the new Irish Free State and its claims to nationality and citizenship; *Irish questions* on how to resolve internal tensions – sporting and political; and for the international athletic and Olympic worlds, the nascent Empire Games movement was a rival to their eminence.

In such cases the personal pronoun model (using ‘we/they’ perspectives) was useful to first trace and then follow the figural dynamics at play. But we had to consider that what we regarded as significant might have had different relevance, or been important in different ways, to the people of the time. Dunning’s voice and his own research experiences steadied us. Not only had he encountered such challenges in his work on the development of rugby union, association football and crowd disorder, but also he had lived through societal transitions. ‘If you stick with it, you will uncover key figural events and even generational shifts’, he once said to Liston.

Think away the existence of television we did, which has standardized many sporting vernaculars within living memory, especially in Ireland concerning Delany's 1956 achievement. Think away airplanes, which had aided the processes of internationalization and the globalization of sport, athletics included. Irish Olympic teams travelled by boat to the 1932, 1948 and 1956 Olympics.⁴ Think away the existence of a defined nation state and of sport as a unified phenomenon, which it was believed to have been at previous stages of its development. All this and more were necessary before we could fully re-enter socio-historical and cultural worlds that were lost and/or incomplete. Not only had we to ascertain the existence of material, of potential relevance to a wider and longer-term story about 'the Irish athletic question', but also we had to establish access to it, interrogate its status for what it revealed or omitted and, at times, circumvent this via triangulation with other sources.

As a result, we discovered that we were sometimes looking in less fruitful places. Meetings were not minuted fully, were 'off the record' (such as a conversation between Burghley and a Foreign Office (FO) official), and thus off the archival radar. Some material had the feeling of a cloak of established power at work: where official and private written communication occurred between executive members of the IOC, IAAF, BOA and AAA, that sometimes excluded the voices and perspectives of outsiders or, where included, were more often than not painted in colours of group disgrace or shame. Yet others appeared to have been 'over weeded', perhaps to protect an oral communication culture at the highest level of power regimes and because of contemporary concerns regarding what had transpired about the personal views and lives of those involved (e.g. anti-Jewish or Irish sentiment). 'Think until it

hurts' Dunning had said to us both many times. Let us briefly examine what he meant in this regard.

Figurational sociology and 'doing research'

Sociology, for Elias and Dunning, was multi-dimensional: seeking to trace and explain figurational developments in space, time and experience. Such analysis necessarily involves more or less use of primary and/or secondary sources guided by a theoretical underpinning. This approach led Dunning, with Elias and others, to seek to move beyond factor thinking and law-like generalizations reflected, for example, in the reliance upon questionnaires (a 'Pavlovian reflex of social research' [Mennell, 1977: 106]), and to draw from the wealth of insights to be gleaned from a wide range of sources e.g. from documents, maps, photographs and older visual forms, other forms of literature and historical evidence; from observing people's reactions to such simple actions as untied shoelaces, and their behaviour in museums, castles, landscapes and fishing villages (Elias, 1967); or a taste for art, through to speaking to people – young and old, dominant and subordinate. Dunning shared Elias's desire to pass on this knowledge 'to younger men and women understanding and able enough to take it up and use it in their own way' (Elias, 1952, cited in *Figurations*, 2004).

That they did not see themselves as arbiters of scientific methods *per se* was reflected in their aim: discovery. This involves description – the 'what' questions – but also attempts at more adequate explanation – 'how' and 'why'. In this vein, the credibility of scientific work was not solely determined by a formalistic method that imitated natural scientific measurements and determinants of causality (as might be the case in research traditions with dedicated methods such as conversation analysis for

example). Such approaches were more inclined to ‘cut their cloth to suit the method’. In other words, method took primacy over research design rather than research questions. Five principles pertaining to the conduct of scientific research can be identified in Dunning’s counsel to us, which are in keeping with the main tenets of figurational research (see also, Goudsblom, 1977).

- 1) Human beings are interdependent. People are not closed off (as *homo clausus*) from one another and from other social formations, and social groups do not exist separately from those who comprise them.
- 2) These figurations undergo developments of many kinds, across time and space, some slower and more lasting, others rapid and transient, all underpinned by changing balances of power, polymorphous in form. Thus, the researcher is grappling with people but also with the patterns created by their interdependence, which are relatively independent of the specific properties of those concerned.
- 3) Many of the developments that take place in these figurations continue to be largely unplanned and unforeseen. For instance, the globalization of sport has unintentionally led to the challenging of the dominant Western achievement model in sport, to a widening of ‘body cultures’ such as extreme sports and snowboarding and to a gradual waning in the influence of the British as the so-called ‘makers of modern sport’. Similarly, Brexit has contributed to a destabilization of the unity of the United Kingdom of GB and NI and a concomitant rise in calls for a (re)united Ireland.
- 4) All human knowledge develops within figurations and is therefore one important aspect of their overall development. Thus, our knowledge of the

tapestry of social relations between Ireland and Britain has developed within these figurations.

- 5) A balance between, and a blend of, emotional involvement and detachment from social contexts is a consistent feature of human life. Reality-congruent knowledge can therefore be gained *and* lost.

These figural concepts and ideas demand a transformation in one's thinking and the use of language that probes the emergent and contingent nature of social relations. If our sociological objective was to clear through some of the fog that obscured our understanding of the social forces at play, we had to follow Dunning's advice to 'think until it hurts'. This impacted on the conduct of our research because it required intellectual humility, that is, being able to recognize when the scope of our ignorance might be part of the same knowledge figurations we were examining. Such a quest for exciting significance that began as professional thus became personal, and mutually reinforcing. It involved us working against our own deductions; attempting to rule out other alternative explanations; monitoring our own confidence levels; learning from unofficial, sporting and personal sources, and from those who had lived the 'Irish question'; revisiting evidence, and constantly seeking out new sources, an activity that is ongoing.

The depth of our journey of discovery through athletics and the Olympic movement has meant that we have come to rectify our own and others' errors and misunderstandings. For instance, very recently we uncovered concrete evidence (in a family collection) to confirm that one Irish athlete – O'Malley – who it was claimed in newspaper reports missed one of his events at the 1930 BEG, had in fact partaken

(see image four, centre). An official stamped BEG photo of the start line of his race, a copy of which is reproduced here courtesy of the family, also shows that an ‘Irish’ compatriot, Dickson, also competed (fifth from left). It is claimed in local NI Commonwealth lore that Dickson (from North Belfast Harriers) deliberately missed his event, preferring not to represent ‘Ireland’ in 32-county form. Both myths have now been conclusively debunked.

Image 4 about here

These BEG were both revelatory and confirmatory for our longer-term analysis of questions of jurisdiction and recognition for ‘Ireland’ in athletics. Athletes swore an allegiance to the King in 1930, celebrated imperial pageantry and rule, convinced of British virtue, manhood and supremacy. Yet, this was a multidimensional story about the role that sport played in the trajectory of state formation on the island of Ireland: one that revealed tensions within the Irish Free State (IFS), tensions between the IFS and NI, and between the Irish, the British and the Empire as a whole. In microcosm, the multiple methods and sources began to reveal more of the dynamics of power, culture and control.

But we had to remain vigilant to the fact that official archives are generally established by the powerful to protect or enhance their power and prestige (Schwartz and Cook, 2002). Meanwhile, unofficial archives, such as those maintained by amateur sports historians or family descendants, are often less subjected to professional standards of record keeping. In all cases, archives and historical material are subject to interpretation and reinvention, and have the potential to impact on

memory and identity. ‘Archives ... are not passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested and confirmed’ (Schwartz and Cook, 2002, 1). A number of archives that we explored have been under-utilized, not recognized and the dust had settled, physically and figuratively, on some papers within them until we went about our task. Intuitively, we acted as peer debriefers for each other, especially when one was immersed detective-like in archival work and the other could offer a more detached perspective, befitting the role of a critical constructive friend. Social and new media played their part too: facilitating our sharing of ideas, live discoveries and acting (still) as an informal reflexive diary.

Peer debriefing allowed us to reassess original material that appeared on first sight to be less relevant; further, to propose and consider the adequacy of emerging research codes and themes sensitive to established-outsider relations. One final illustration will suffice to illustrate the sociological craft, involving movement from the particular to the general and the benefits of a two-way traffic between theory and evidence. In the IOC minutes of the 1950s concerning the title and jurisdiction of ‘Ireland’ was passing reference not only to an off-the-record conversation, between Burghley and an FO official, but also to an official government file potentially concerning the Irish athletic question. Sustained searches of official FO files of the late 1940s and early 1950s were unsuccessful in this regard. But we were guided by insights from established-outsider dynamics and the ways in which elites responded to perceived threats, seeking to keep others in check. In ensuring that international sport did not fall into what was regarded as rival (non-Anglo Saxon) hands, our BEG discoveries concerning 1930-1938 and the specific intervention made by senior NI government officials, on behalf of the NIAAA, revealed a growth in the self-image of outsiders

inside, such as those Protestant Unionists leading the NIAAA. From this, our insights into the broader set of relations between sport and state, and of Irish-British political relations, led us to consider the role of the Home Office (known as the Dominions Office) in the 1930s. In carrying out such work we found a memo, prepared on behalf of the AAA and approved by this government office, that crystallized the British position on the political boundary rule, first proposed in the late 1920s and subsequently adopted by the IAAF and IOC. This was the same ‘file’ described in IOC minutes. In giving the AAA’s interpretation government approval, the Dominion Office positioned sporting jurisdiction in Ireland as subservient to politics. The IOC’s and IAAF’s acceptance of this position was influenced by British claims, well-rehearsed in this memo, to a longer-standing sportive and political pedigree over pre-independence Ireland (Liston and Maguire, under review).

In our peer debriefer roles we also detected when the other might have overemphasized a point. Some taken-for-granted assumptions were identified, as were attitudes towards legitimate or even rival data. This enabled us, via a process of secondary reinvolverment, to connect many more of the symptoms typically associated with a self-ascribed sense of superiority and of the connected group shame of the benighted outsiders, not only in the realm of international sport but in the non-sportive statecraft and diplomacy practised by both groups. That we took pleasure in their content reflected our own Irish heritages, in which we had opportunities for exciting significance. But in practising involved detachment, we were also pleased with our discoveries *per se*, taking care to place ourselves in the specific context and prevailing standards, seeking in a *verstehen* sense to understand the perspective of those involved in power struggles. The rotation between us of the more involved or

detached role was also useful for exploring the adequacy of evidence and remaining open to alternative explanations.

Our multisource strategy was thus beneficial. The figurational dynamics, at first limited to available sports archives, were gradually further revealed. Olympic achievements led us to the Commonwealth Games Office and to national archives in Canada. The two-way traffic between theory and evidence pointed us to state records in Dublin and London, where possibilities were confirmed in relation to statecraft and sportcraft, involving senior civil servants and government ministers, in Dominion and Foreign Affairs, and with representatives of the British King and the Irish government. What was redacted or excluded was sometimes revealed in another source; what was fragmented or a typed duplicate in a sports archive contained a handwritten insight elsewhere in state records. Slowly we uncovered the legacies of the figurations involved. In this chronological picture, from the 1920s to the 1980s, the nexus of sportcraft and statecraft has become much clearer but necessarily incomplete.

Conclusion

‘Big sociology’ requires that we probe how the present emerges from the past and how specific patterns/puzzles must be located in the wider space. Yet, this is not simply a question of adding a historical dimension. It requires a history of the everyday present and a sociology of the past. The conceptual tools and antennae of a figurational approach play a crucial role in this regard. Acknowledging that the past was a far-off country was for us a first step. Recognising that we, too, were caught up in the social currents we sought to understand was another. A two-way traffic between

evidence and theory helped in the necessary detour via detachment: maintaining a degree of distance in time, place and experience from the object of study. Use of a personal pronoun model assisted further in grasping the interplay of interests and power relations at work. Deploying established-outsider theory enhanced this thinking and moved the empirical analysis from a particular historical event or individual account to the more general (but not necessarily generalizable) patterns and processes at work between groups of people, without underplaying the individual athletes and non-state diplomats involved.

Our sources enabled us to identify a selective amnesia about Ireland at the interwar BEG, now redressed in official Irish athletics records. There was also wilful nostalgia and even mythology in some quarters, and a retreat to the present in others. Furthermore, there was a much broader set of issues involving statecraft, international relations and the role of cultural intermediaries. Because sources were elusive, difficult to access and even unknown to us at different stages in the research process, we were also dealing with the classic ‘black tulip’ in the conduct of research (Dumas, 1904). And what more is out there is our, as yet, undiscovered country.

But, having worked with and closely observed Dunning’s commitment to the vocation of sociology, it is important to acknowledge that we have also learned much about our ‘selves’. We are indeed a troubled Irish – troubled by the past, its impact upon the present and its role in the creation of the social conditions for the future. It is a moot question as to whether those who live in those societies on these North Atlantic islands have attained an increasing degree of detachment in their approaches to themselves. Control over the processes of social change in Irish-British relations, and

over our own feelings in thinking about them, is the challenge of our times. We have encountered many worldviews of ‘the Irish’, such as Burghley’s who embodied a particular British-English view of the Irish as people who should know ‘their place’. In this, a performative element is at work by degrees involving the coexistence of magical mythical and reality congruent knowledge. Alternatively, today, the Friends of Irish Athletics, some of whom are former members of the now disbanded NACA, continue to lobby for a derogation of World Athletics’ political boundary rule. In this is the legacy of divisions within athletics in Ireland, in which injuries of the past continue to inform the emotions and actions of the present. Their strategy is arguably more reality congruent in that they seek all-island representation in World Athletics-sanctioned competitions, a position that was reinstated in Olympic sport in the 1950s.

The current historical moment is an opportune time to make advances in knowledge, provide a guide to principal conflicts and difficulties, and alert us to mistakes that have been made and to some of the possible solutions for avoiding these. Figurational sociologists are well placed to do this and to offer important insights into a variety of interrelated issues: accelerating global social change, processes of populism around the world and, within academia, the ongoing war of the paradigms in sociology and the intensity of competition both within and between academic disciplines. A central issue is the purpose of sociological knowledge as – in the case of sport – a means of helping people to orientate themselves better in the complex and fluid social world. Though now having ‘left the stage’, Eric’s insights into the sociological craft and his commitment to sociology as a vocation live on, combining immense intellectual ambition with personal modesty. His collaborations, with Elias, as well as his own

life's work have contributed much to the resurgence of interest in figurational sociology. We are indebted to him for this.

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Image One: Ronnie Delany, Olympic gold medalist, 1500 metres

Image Two: 1956 Olympic scoreboard

The scoreboard is a black board with white and yellow text. At the top, it features the Olympic motto in English and French, followed by a statement about the Olympic movement. Below this, it specifies the event as 'EVENT 6 1500 M FINAL'. The results are listed in three columns: bib number, athlete name, country, and time. The present world record is also displayed at the bottom.

THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT TENDS TO BRING TOGETHER IN A RADIANT UNION ALL THE QUALITIES, WHICH GUIDE MANKIND TO PERFECTION! <small>CLASSIFICATION OF POINTS ON A NATIONAL BASIS IS NOT RECOGNISED</small>			
EVENT 6 1500 M FINAL			
102	DELANEY	EIR	3-41.2
134	RICHT'AIN	GER	3-42.0
156	LANDY	AUS	3-42.0
686	TABORI	HUN	
162	HEWSON	GBI	
626	JUNGWIRTH	CZS	
PRESENT WORLD RECORD			3-40.6

Image Three: 1956 Parade of Olympic Teams

Image Four: 1930 British Empire Games

¹ Éire (with an accent) is the native Gaelic term for Ireland. British state officials used it (without the accent) to describe the (partitioned 26-county) Irish Free State.

² This group was also known as the 'New English', distinct from the 'Old English', who descended from medieval Norman settlers. Members of this ruling class self-identified as Irish (Maguire, 2016) but retained English cultural, commercial and political tastes and habits. This led to the comparison between the Anglo-Irish and the Prussian Junker class (e.g. Barnett, 1970, in Bowen and Bowen, 2005). The term British-Irish relations was generally introduced in the 1990s as a reflection of the need to emphasise the totality of east-west relations, beyond London per se.

³ Elias made only passing references to Ireland in Volume 6 (2010) of the Collected Works: on the lasting legacy of religious wars of the seventeenth century (p7), Catholicism and Irish language as barriers to total integration in the UK (p142) and the Troubles (p.159).

⁴ The gap in Olympic participation from 1932 to 1948 is explained by the OCI's boycott of the 1936 Games and the enforced hiatus owing to World War Two.